

# VINCENT VAN GOGH PAINTINGS

VOLUME I

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DUTCH PERIOD

1881-1885

VAN GOGH MUSEUM

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LOUIS VAN TILBORGH

MARIJE VELLEKOOP

VAN GOGH MUSEUM, AMSTERDAM

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Vincent van Gogh: Paintings

Volume 1: Dutch Period 1881-1885

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# Acknowledgements

More than 200 paintings survive from Van Gogh's Dutch period (1881-85).

The Van Gogh Museum has 44 of them, and they are the subject of this first volume of the catalogue of Van Gogh's paintings held by the museum.

This book shows how Van Gogh evolved in a short space of time from an untutored beginner to a genuine and original master. His first paintings of 1881, which were made under the tutelage of Anton Mauve, look conventional enough, but his work of a little more than six months later displays a very personal hand. His rapidly developing sense of colour and use of the brush can be seen by comparing *Still life with cabbage and clogs* (*cat. 1*) with the rapidly executed *Still life with Bible* (*cat. 42*) of 1885.

All the paintings were subjected to a technical examination in preparation for this catalogue. The research was carried out by Cornelia Peres and Marije Vellekoop, and involved studying the works with the naked eye and under a microscope. They were also examined for any underdrawings using infrared reflectography. X-radiographs made of all the paintings provided information about alterations and underlying scenes. The technical descriptions of the paintings include the width of the brushstrokes in order to arrive at a better definition of Van Gogh's hand. The detailed information on the kinds of canvas used by Van Gogh specify whether the edges are original. Paint samples taken from several paintings were analysed by E. Jägers (Bornheim, Mikroanalytisches Labor). Unfortunately, with a few exceptions the findings of that research could not be incorporated in this catalogue and will be published separately elsewhere.

In contrast to the first two volumes of the catalogue of the collection, *Drawings 1* and *2*, the list of exhibitions at the back of the book also contains sources that were consulted in order to identify the works at the relevant exhibitions (see further the 'Note to the reader' preceding the catalogue section). It is also stated whether the paintings were for sale. Gathering this and other exhibition data proved a time-consuming and occasionally difficult task, but Monique Hageman carried it out with as much pleasure as enthusiasm.

This book could not have been written without the assistance of others. M.A.W. Gerding, Provincial Historian of Drenthe, supplied information about the different kinds of labourers' dwellings in the province. Gerard Rooijakkers illuminated the cultural history of 19th-century Brabant. Ton de Brouwer (Van Gogh Documentation Centre, Nuenen) and J. Spoorenweg (Eindhoven Regional Archives) supplied answers to specific questions regarding the history and topography of Nuenen. As ever, we could rely on the support of Walter Feilchenfeldt, and Roland Dorn and Martha Op de Coul came to our aid.

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on several occasions. *Art Innovation* in Hengelo kindly supplied us with a photograph of the infrared reflectogram of *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42).

We owe a great debt of gratitude to our colleagues in the museum. The scientific research was conducted under the inspiring leadership of Cornelia Peres. Fieke Pabst did invaluable work in gathering the documentation, while Anita Vriend helped track down the literature. Frans Stive and Alex Nikken were always ready to turn their schedules upside-down if we wanted to study a picture out of its frame at short notice.

The editing of the book was in reliable hands. Sjraar van Heugten, Leo Jansen and Hans Luijten were as generous with their praise as they were unsparing with their criticism. Jan Robert, the editor-in-chief, has the rare gift of being able to inspire tired writers who thought they had reached the finish line to begin incorporating his justifiable corrections and imperative recommendations. We are also grateful to Rachel Esner, Michael Hoyle and Sabine Rieger, who not only translated the texts but also raised critical points that helped improve them. Ella Hendriks kindly provided English translations of technical terms. The co-ordination of the book was in the hands of Benno Tempel, who was also responsible for assembling the photographs. Finally, we would like to thank W.A. Nederlof, who cast his eagle eye over the colour nuances in Van Gogh's dark, Dutch œuvre, and publisher Cees de Jong, who retained his good humour even when deadlines had long been passed.

Louis van Tilborgh

Marije Vellekoop

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# Five parcels and three crates.

## The origins of a collection (1881-85)

All but a few of the paintings described in this catalogue originally belonged to Theo van Gogh, Vincent's younger brother. The collection was gradually built up in the course of their lives, and was the fruit of their devotion to each other.

It all began very unpretentiously, with very different intentions and without any great expectations. From 1881, shortly after deciding to become an artist, Van Gogh regularly sent examples of his work to his brother, who was in Paris at the Goupil art gallery (later Boussod, Valadon & Cie).<sup>1</sup> He did so both to show the progress he was making and to get Theo's expert advice: 'Now tell me, why don't they sell, and how can I make them saleable' [180/156]. Van Gogh ignored the advice that he was given by the landscapist Anton Mauve (1838-1888) at the end of 1881, which was to keep all his studies (consisting solely of drawings at first) in his studio as reference material. He carried on sending work to Theo, although often with a note that he would like it back.<sup>2</sup> As his self-assurance grew in the course of 1882, he also hoped that his brother would act as his dealer. 'If you show those you think suitable to people who happen to come to your room, it may be the beginning of selling them. When more and different ones by the same hand are together, they show off to better advantage, and one explains and complements the other' [221/195]. He invariably left it up to Theo to decide whether the works were good enough to sell. 'I myself cannot judge whether some of my studies are finished enough to be worthy of being kept anywhere else but in my studio,' he modestly wrote [346/286].

When it became clear during 1882 that his brother would support him financially, Vincent also began regarding his work as a repayment in kind.<sup>3</sup> 'If there is anything you want to keep, if there is anything I have here that you would like to have, just say so, because I regard everything as belonging to you' [266/232]. He repeated this offer in connection with other consignments: 'you must of course regard those you like your own property' [344/284]. This was all said out of friendship and as a natural reaction to Theo's generous gesture. There was no firm agreement, for the future was uncertain and as yet there was no question of selling anything.

In mid-1883, however, Van Gogh suddenly felt the need for security. He expressly stated that all his works, including those he had not sent to his brother, were now officially Theo's property. 'My studies and all the work in my studio most decidedly belong to you' [370/305]. He did this in order to keep them out of the hands of creditors, should he get into financial difficulties, as he himself wrote: 'There is no question of that at the moment, [...] but if I can't pay my tax bill at some stage in the future they could sell it all, but if that happens I want my work somewhere safe, not at home. They are my

See the catalogue section for all the technical data relating to the paintings mentioned in this essay.

<sup>1</sup> He sent his first batch of drawings from Brussels at the beginning of 1881; see letters 161/140 and 163/142.

<sup>2</sup> Mauve's advice is mentioned in letter 418/349. Van Gogh first asked for the return of works in letter 204/175: 'I am getting more frugal with my studies and should like to get back those that you have.'

<sup>3</sup> Theo had supplied money on earlier occasions, but from February 1881 he was supporting his brother almost single-handed, as emerges from a letter from his father of 14 February 1881 (inv. b 2235

V/1982). At first Vincent was probably unaware of the arrangement, for Theo sent the allowance directly to his parents.

It was only in 1882, when Vincent left of his parents' home in Etten and moved to The Hague, that it was Theo who had been supporting him.

<sup>4</sup> The description in letter 270/234 could also apply to F 8a JH 180, but since he commended Girl in a wood to Theo in letter 262/229 it is more likely that this was the one he sent.

<sup>5</sup> It is clear from letter 268/233 that Theo was eager to see a painted study.

<sup>6</sup> In letter 266/232, Van Gogh had asked for the return of the studies that Theo did not want to keep. His brother did not respond immediately (letters 281/241 and 292/250), but evidently sent them back after Vincent repeated his request in

studies, and I need them for my future work. They took me a great deal of trouble to make' [370/305]. Ironically, his fears were the consequence of his growing self-confidence; he felt that it would not be long before he had work that he could sell – but for that he needed his studies.

#### PAINTINGS

It was not until the summer of 1882 that Van Gogh began painting on a regular basis, and in September he sent just one sample to Theo, probably *Girl in a wood* (fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> He had wanted to wait until he had something more accomplished, but eventually decided to satisfy Theo's curiosity.<sup>5</sup> As before, he was expecting expert advice: 'be assured that I will pay close attention to what you have to say about the work's saleability' [268/233]. Although nothing is said about it in the letters, Theo evidently returned *Girl in a wood*, possibly with some drawings that Vincent had asked for.<sup>6</sup>

Vincent did not send any more paintings until a year later, when he was in Drenthe, and he was presumably still expecting Theo to assess them with a view to sale. The first consignment went off at the end of September 1883, and consisted of three studies. 'I am sending them to give you an idea of what I am doing, which will get better as I go along, you know' [392/327]. The next batch was ready in mid-November, a little over a month later, and consisted of six paintings. They were really intended for the Dutch art dealer E.J. van Wisselingh (1849–1912), whom Vincent had promised to show samples of his recent work:<sup>7</sup> 'though I do not suppose that they will be considered saleable' [408/341]. His last paintings from Drenthe were sent off in February 1884 from Nuenen, where he had moved in with his parents at the beginning of December. In addition to nine recent watercolours made in Nuenen, it contained 'three small panels,' about which Vincent wrote: 'If there's anything you like, tant mieux' [431/356].<sup>8</sup>

It is not precisely clear what happened to these 12 Drenthe paintings. No more than six painted studies have survived from this period, and only three of them (*cats. 3–5*) were in Theo's estate.<sup>9</sup> Vincent's brother probably honoured their earlier agreement and only



1 *Girl in a wood* (F 8 JH 182), 1885.  
Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.

connection with later consignments

(see letter 300/258).

7 Letter 383/318. See also cat. 4. Van Wisselingh had a small gallery in Paris from 1882 to 1884 (kind communication of Freek Heijbroek).

8 On this consignment see cat. 3, note 7.

9 See cat. 3, note 8. It is evident from letters 434/358 and 450/369 that Theo had certainly received F 22 JH 421 (cat. 5) and 'a weaver's cottage in the evening,' and possibly 'the old church-yard' as well. The latter two are now lost, but the compositions are known from sketches in letters 390/325 and 399/335. Van Gogh made at least 13 paintings in Drenthe; see cat. 3, note 8.

10 There had been constant friction between the two brothers from the moment Van Gogh moved to Nuenen. For an analysis and account of the problems see Hulsker 1990, pp. 169–75.

11 He wanted to dispatch work on a monthly basis (see letter 443/364), and had suggested sending drawings each month back in May 1882 (letter 221/195).

12 See letter 434/358.

13 The old church tower is F 34 JH 459.

14 The last consignment, of drawings, was in May 1884 (see letter 450/369). Theo had commended him on his drawing (see letters 432/357 and 434/358) – which was what elicited this gesture.

15 Letter 488/395.

16 See letter 492/397. It is possible that Theo took away work by his brother on more than one occasion. An undated letter, probably to his uncle, C.M. van Gogh, mentions that Theo had taken 'two small studies.' According to the 1990 edition of the correspondence, that particular letter (193/165a) was written in 1881–83, but that is incorrect. Van Gogh had 'not seen any paintings for such a long time,' which means that the letter must have been written in Nuenen, not The Hague. It probably dates from early August 1885, when Theo evidently returned to Paris by way of Amsterdam (see Theo's letter to Andries Bonger of 6 August that year (inv. b 889 V/1975). The letter was not sent or handed over by

Theo, for it was found among his belongings after his death. It is not known, of course, whether he actually did take any paintings with him.

17 Letter 506/409.

18 The watercolours are F 1113 JH 438 and a lost work. He wrote in letter 506/409: 'I have now finished seven heads.' He then stated that he would be sending more paintings, from which it is clear that the June batch consisted mainly of recent work. The consignment of early May probably included some earlier studies. Before dispatching it, at any rate, he told Theo that his labours on The potato eaters had left him with little time for anything else. He would 'add a few smaller ones' [501/404], but since he eventually sent 'ten' he must have enclosed a small selection from his stock of studies done long before.

19 It can be deduced from letter 506/409 that the first batch also contained F 85 JH 693, a study of a head that was later sold; see cats. 10-18, note 20.

20 The second consignment must also have included F 163 JH 687, the study that was sold in 1931. This is probably the work described in letter 509/410 (see Dorn in Vienna 1996, p. 188). That letter also reveals that F 86 JH 785, a study of head, was in this batch.

L.C. Enthoven is listed as the first owner in De la Faille 1970, but he must have acquired it from Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. The study of a woman's head, F 141 JH 783, may also have been in the second consignment. Van Gogh says in letter 506/409 that he had 'finished seven heads,' among them this one, which he had just completed, and since the letter continues 'so I could send a small batch again,' it would have been odd if he had not included it, particularly in view of the fact that it is signed. H.P. Bremmer is mentioned as the first owner in De la Faille 1970. He may have acquired it from Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, but once again there is not a single document recording such a transaction. See also Consignments, pp. 238-39.

21 The four works were probably F 90 JH 823, F 91 JH 809, F 170 JH 824 and

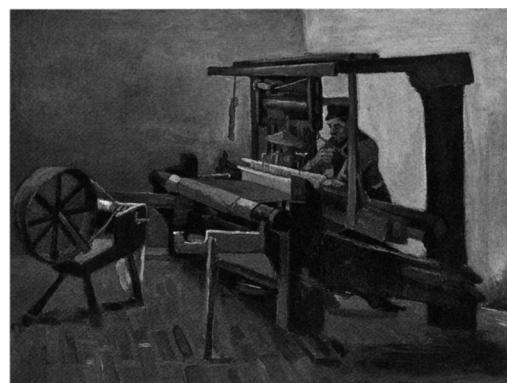
kept what he liked, sending the rest back. On the evidence of Vincent's letters, Theo had not been very enthusiastic about what he had received, and this seems to be borne out by the small number of paintings he retained.

#### IN SEARCH OF RECOGNITION

During the first few months of his stay in Nuenen, Van Gogh began to get annoyed about the well-intentioned but, in his opinion, completely uncommitted financial support that he was getting from his brother.<sup>10</sup> Theo sent money, but Vincent believed that he was not really dedicated to him, either as a collector or dealer. He felt that his work now had to be treated differently, and stubbornly tried to win artistic recognition from Theo. At the beginning of February 1884 he proposed that Theo's financial assistance be put on a new, more business-like and detached footing. 'Let me send you my work and you keep what you like for yourself, but I insist on regarding the money I receive from you after March as money I have earned' [430/360].<sup>11</sup>

These attempts to transform his brother into either a dispassionate art dealer or an enthusiastic collector led to nothing but the reiteration of Theo's old standpoint: he still did not consider Vincent's paintings ready to sell.<sup>12</sup> Van Gogh threatened to go to other dealers, but he was well aware that he could not survive without the money from his brother. Their relationship cooled considerably, and Vincent took refuge in cynicism. He wrote to Theo in April 1884 to say that he had 'a few painted studies that are your property, so you can do what you like with them. I will send them if you wish, but if you don't care for them I would ask if I may keep them for a while to work from them' [443/364]. They included the Weaver (fig. 2), *The old church tower* (Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum), and an unidentified 'view of an old village near here'.<sup>13</sup>

No agreement was reached. The 'gun barrels [are pointing] in opposite directions,' he wrote [465/380], and so they remained for some time to come. Despite his brother's petu-



2 Weaver (F 29 JH 471), 1884. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.



3 Cottage with a woman and a goat (F 90 JH 823), 1885. Frankfurt, Städelisches Kunstinstitut.

lant behaviour, Theo loyally carried on paying the monthly allowance.<sup>14</sup> Later that year, Vincent baited him for his automatism by calling him a ‘good ministre des Beaux-Arts’ [474/386b]. ‘Rather than protection,’ he would like to sell his work in return for board and lodging and painting materials to ‘some dealer or other, however much of an inferior jobber he may be,’ but since no one had come beating a path to his door he was forced to continue accepting Theo’s support [475/388].

This armed truce only came to an end in late February 1885, when Theo offered to help choose works for submission to the annual Paris Salon, if Vincent had any that were ready.<sup>15</sup> Van Gogh seized on the opportunity to resume his consignments to Theo. He did not have anything suitable for the Salon, he replied, but did want to make some more studies of heads, because ‘it might be useful if you meet some people at the Salon to show them something, even if it’s only *studies*. You will be getting the heads of an old and a young woman, and probably even more than one of these two models’ [488/395]. In the end he sent nothing, but at the end of March Theo took some paintings back to Paris after coming to Nuenen for the funeral of their father, who had died suddenly.<sup>16</sup> They included the *Vase with honesty* (cat. 8) and probably three of the studies that Vincent had promised (cats. 12-14).

Relations were back on a good footing. Theo had reacted favourably to Vincent’s new work, and the latter began doing what he had suggested in early 1884: mailing paintings in monthly batches. In contrast to his Hague period, he asked for none of them back. He was sending them ‘out into the world,’ to quote from an earlier letter [430/360].

#### FOUR CONSIGNMENTS

The first shipment took place at the beginning of May 1885. It consisted of *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), Vincent’s first mature painting, and ‘ten painted studies’ [503/406]. He packed his ambitious figure piece flat in a crate and made a parcel of the studies, labelling the consignment ‘V[incent]I’ [504/407]. In early June he put together a second batch, although he did ask Theo first whether he wanted it.<sup>17</sup> In the crate, labelled ‘V<sub>2</sub>,’ were two watercolours and 14 paintings: *The cottage* (cat. 27), *The old church tower* (cat. 28) and ‘12 Etudes peintes’ [509/410], which included at least seven studies of heads.<sup>18</sup>

It is not exactly known which of the paintings in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum were included in these two consignments, apart from the three named works. All that is certain is that the *Study for the potato eaters* (cat. 25) was in the parcel sent in May.<sup>19</sup> It is possible that most of the heads (cats. 10, 11, 15-18) and the studies dating from this period (cats. 20-24) had been dispatched as well, but there is no direct evidence for this.<sup>20</sup>

Van Gogh planned a third consignment for mid-July 1885, which was initially intended to consist of ‘four canvases’ [522/418].<sup>21</sup> He wanted to mail the paintings (which included *Cottage with a woman and a goat*; fig. 3) before Theo came to Holland at the end of the month, but did not have enough money to do so. He asked for some more, which his brother was unable or unwilling to provide. Vincent then decided to send the pictures

F 1669 JH 825 (see cat. 29, note 1).

22 For this chain of events see letters 521/417, 522/418, 527/420, 530/422, 531/422.

23 He had earlier spoken of ‘a few cottages, the old church tower and some smaller ones with figures’ [530/421].

The works destined for Theo are listed in note 21 above. In the end, nothing was sold; see cat. 29, note 9.

24 F 113 JH 944; fig. 41a in cat. 41.

25 The batch may also have included F 112 JH 938 and F 106 JH 936 (see cat. 30). The Bowl of pears is F 105 JH 926 (see cats. 30-34, fig. 30a).

26 It is no longer possible to identify which of the smaller painted studies these were, but one may have been Still life with vegetables and fruit (cat. 43). See further Consignments.

27 See letter 549/438.

28 Two paintings which form an exception are F 3 JH 186 and F 13 JH 179 from his Hague period, which have signatures very similar to the one on the View of the IJ described in the catalogue under the rejected works, which has the same provenance. There are five known exceptions from the Nuenen period; three are discussed in notes 29 and 30 below, the other two are F 34 JH 459 and F 88 JH 490. F 34 was intended for Theo (see letter 443/364), but was never sent and was later given to Margot Begemann. All that remains is F 88 JH 490, a small church tower of August 1884, which is the only work that cannot be linked to a consignment to Theo or a present to someone else.

29 The only other signed head is F 141 JH 783, which was probably in the batch of June 1885 (see note 20).

30 The two other still lifes in this signed group are F 112 JH 938 and F 106 JH 936, which may also have been in the consignment of October 1885. F 112 JH 938 has a provenance that can almost certainly be traced back to Theo’s collection; see note 44. The case of F 106 JH 936 is not quite as clear-cut.

According to De la Faille, the first owner was the collector L.C. Enthoven. He may have acquired the painting from Johanna

van Gogh-Bonger, but there is no documentary evidence for this.

31 F 170 JH 824.

32 See note 22 for Leurs's consignment.

33 See letters 270/234 ('by post'), and 392/327 ('by parcel post') and 431/356 ('a parcel'). It is only with the second batch from Drenthe that he fails to give such a description, but it can be assumed that he did not suddenly switch to a new form of shipment without mentioning it.

34 With thanks to Koos Havelaar, curator of the PTT Museum in The Hague.

35 On the basis of a canvas measuring 40 x 50 centimetres with a stretcher 2 centimetres thick, there would only have been room for six paintings.

36 See letter 492/397, in which Vincent says: 'I would like to know whether those rolled-up things arrived safely.'

37 See letters 509/410 and 538/427. Both consignments contained paintings that made it impossible to send the entire batch by parcel post. V2 included The cottage (cat. 27) and The old church tower at Nuenen (cat. 28), which were 79.3 and 80.0 cm wide respectively. With packaging they would have exceeded the

instead to the colourman Wilhelmus Johannes Leurs (1828-1895) in The Hague.<sup>22</sup> Leurs had offered to display Van Gogh's work in his shop window, and the latter hoped that he could sell something and pay off part of his hefty debts to Leurs. The consignment, which eventually went off at the end of August, contained '7 paintings of various subjects and, to make it more complete, 12 smaller painted studies' [531/422], which may have included the paintings intended for Theo and the *Woman lifting potatoes* (cat. 29).<sup>23</sup> Vincent wrote to his brother telling him that he was sorry not to have sent the works to him, for 'the things that remained with you would have been of the very best, a nucleus to be gradually enlarged as we progressed' [531/422].

He again dispatched work to Theo in the second week of October 1885, in a crate labelled 4. This was no innocent slip of the pen but a sly dig at Theo, rubbing it in that he had missed out on some good paintings. By refusing to give him any extra money, Theo had as it were forced him to send them to Leurs.

The crate contained 'the still lifes' [538/427], as well as two cityscapes that Van Gogh had made in Amsterdam: *The De Ruijterkade* (cat. 41) and a *View of the Singel* (Amsterdam, Stichting Collectie P. en N. de Boer).<sup>24</sup> He did not say how many works were in the consignment, but did describe seven of the still lifes (cats. 30-33, 35, 39 and *Bowl of pears* [Utrecht, Centraal Museum, on loan from the Stichting Museum Van Baaren]). Since there were 11 such paintings in Theo's collection, it seems that the other four (cats. 34, 36-38) were also included in this batch.<sup>25</sup>

Van Gogh wanted to send off more work the following month. He had completed *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42) and 'two studies of autumn leaves,' by which he was referring



4 Avenue of poplars (F 45 JH 959),  
1885. Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans  
Van Beuningen.



5 Autumn landscape (F 44 JH 962),  
1885. Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.

to *Avenue of poplars* (fig. 4) and *Autumn landscape* (fig. 5). He later added ‘a large mill on the moor at twilight’ [545/434]. In the end, though, he did not send anything. He gave *Autumn landscape* (fig. 5) to his friend Anton Kerssemakers (1846–1924), and took the other three compositions to Antwerp, to which he moved at the end of November, along with ‘a few small ones’ and ‘several figure drawings’ [543/434 and 548/437].<sup>26</sup> He tried to interest Antwerp art dealers in the large paintings,<sup>27</sup> but without success, so he must have taken them to Paris at the beginning of 1886, where they were reunited with the works sent from Nuenen. It is possible that ‘the large mill on the moor’ was left behind in Antwerp and became lost, for no such landscape is known.

#### SIGNATURE

It is notable that almost all the signed works from Van Gogh’s Dutch period were in the batches intended for Theo.<sup>28</sup> His most ambitious, accomplished paintings from consignments V1 and V2 – *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), *The cottage* (cat. 27), *The old church tower* (cat. 28) – are signed, as are several compositions that he described as studies, including a fine head (cat. 12),<sup>29</sup> and two still lifes painted in the autumn of 1885 (cats. 32, 39).<sup>30</sup> *Cottage with a woman and a goat* (fig. 3), *Cottage with a peasant*,<sup>31</sup> *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42) and *Avenue of poplars* (fig. 4) are also signed. *Cottage with a woman and a goat* and *Cottage with a peasant* were in the batch that was to be sent to Theo but probably went to Leurs instead.<sup>32</sup> *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42) and *Avenue of poplars* were meant to have gone to Theo in November 1885, but were eventually taken to Antwerp by Van Gogh himself.

#### PACKAGING

It is not known whether Van Gogh packed his canvases loose or attached to a stretcher or strainer. We do, however, know how he shipped them. In The Hague and Drenthe he mailed them by parcel post, to which a number of restrictions applied.<sup>33</sup> No side could be longer than 80 centimetres, there was a weight limit of 5 kilograms, and the volume was not to exceed 25 cubic decimetres.<sup>34</sup> This meant that a parcel could contain several paintings mounted on stretchers.<sup>35</sup> In view of the postage involved, however, Van Gogh probably preferred to send his canvases loose.

The studies that Theo took with him at the end of March 1885 were rolled up.<sup>36</sup> The large figure piece, *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), on the other hand, was sent in a ‘small, light crate’ at the beginning of May [503/406]. It was longer than 80 centimetres on all sides, so could not be mailed as a parcel. Given the importance that Van Gogh attached to this painting, it would have been fastened to a stretcher or strainer, although there is no hard-and-fast evidence that it was. The ten painted studies went off at the same time in a parcel, and were presumably loose canvases.

Van Gogh’s next two consignments, V2 and V4, did not include any parcels. All the works were packed in a ‘small crate’ and a ‘crate’ respectively.<sup>37</sup> It is impossible to say how large they were, but since Van Gogh would undoubtedly have tried to keep the ship-

Post Office limit for parcels. Consignment V4 contained Still life with brass cauldron and jug (cat. 35), which was 80.5 cm across.

38 That many of the works that Vincent sent had no stretcher emerges from his suggestion to Theo in early October 1885 to use drawing pins to hang ‘many of my studies on the wall, the old as well as the new ones’ [537/426].

39 Canvas impressions are found on cats. 2, 5, 8–10, 12, 14–16, 20–22, 24, 25, 29, 34, 37, 38, 43.

40 Letter 392/327: ‘Today I will be sending three studies by parcel post which I hope are dry enough. However, if they stick to the sheet of paper I put them as a precaution, sponge them off with luke-warm water.’

41 Those that would have been sent back were F 8 JH 182 (fig. 1) and nine studies from Drenthe.

42 This calculation is based on the following facts. Theo had held on to three of 12 works made in Drenthe. At the end of March 1885 he took four studies from Nuenen to Paris. Vincent sent at least 11 paintings at the beginning of May and 14 at the beginning of June. The consignment of early October contained at least nine.

43 This total of 13 omits F 86 JH 785, F 106 JH 936 and F 141 JH 783 (see notes 29 and 30), but does include the four paintings in Aurier’s collection (see note 44), as well as F 178 JH 528 and F 365 JH 654 (see note 45). All nine are included in the Consignments, where they are marked with an asterisk.

According to this reconstruction, Theo had 53 paintings from Vincent’s Dutch period. The list that Andries Boerger drew up of the works in Theo’s collection around 1890 (inv. b 3055 V/1962) records only 35 Dutch paintings (as far as can be determined at present). It is difficult to account for the discrepancy.

44 Aurier had the following Dutch paintings in his collection (if one also counts those belonging to his heirs): F 85 JH 693, F 154 JH 608, F 160a JH 563 and F 112 JH 939 (for the latter see Johannes van der Wolk, ‘Honderd jaar

Kröller-Müller,' in: R.W.D. Oxenaar et al., Kröller-Müller Museum honderd jaar bouwen en verzamelen, Haarlem 1988, p. 22). He could only have got these works from Theo.

45 It is not only Elisabeth's painting (F 178 JH 899) that has a reverse painted in Paris, but F 365 JH 654 as well, which only came to light there in the 1920s. Both would therefore have been in the brothers' collection, although they are not documented as such in the œuvre catalogues. For the sake of completeness it should be mentioned that doubts have been cast on the authenticity of both works: see Walter Feilchenfeldt and Roland Dorn, 'Genuine or fake? – on the history and problems of Van Gogh connoisseurship,' in: Tsukasa Kōdera, The mythology of Vincent van Gogh, Tokyo and Amsterdam 1993, pp. 290, 296, but their viewpoint is debatable.

46 Research into the sale and thus the provenance of the works in Theo's (and later Johanna's) collection has not yet been completed. The suggestions made here (see also notes 29, 30 and 44) can only be assessed properly when that has been done.

47 A similar photograph of the interior (inv. b 4923 V/1985) reveals that at some time it was replaced by another, unidentifiable work. It is not known when this photograph was taken.

48 See the list of exhibitions in cats. 8 and 28.

49 This does not include the above-mentioned works that must have been in the collection but are not mentioned in any of the documents (F 86 JH 785, F 106 JH 936 and F 141 JH 783; see notes 29 and 30). Two further paintings are mentioned in De la Faille's œuvre catalogue – F 95a JH 899 and F 149 JH 690 – which Johanna is supposed to have sold to the Oldenzeel Galleries and to H.P. Bremmer. No evidence has been found of either transaction, nor is it known whether Vincent sent them to Theo, which is why they have been disregarded here.

50 See Jan de Vries et al., Pieter Haverkorn van Rijswijk 1839–1919.

ping costs down, only a few paintings, at most, would have been on a stretcher or strainer. The others were presumably packed loose, one on top of the other.<sup>38</sup>

There is evidence of this way of packing on the paintings themselves. Many of those in the museum's collection have weave indentations on the peaks of the impasto, although this could also have been the result of placing wet canvases against each other in the studio.<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, too, the paint surface of several studies of heads (cats. 13, 15, 16, 18, 20) and of the *Bobbin winder* (cat. 24) have impressions left by newspapers. They were probably not quite dry when they were shipped off, so Van Gogh interleaved them with paper, as he certainly did with his first consignment from Drenthe.<sup>40</sup>

#### THEO'S COLLECTION

A count of the paintings sent to Theo shows that he received at least 55, ten of which he returned.<sup>41</sup> Vincent took four or more from Antwerp to Paris, bringing the total to at least 49.<sup>42</sup>

This conservative estimate is quite close to the number known from their provenances to have been in Theo's collection: at least 50 (see Consignments). The present collection in the Van Gogh Museum contains 37 Dutch paintings that came from Theo, but it is known that at least 13 were sold or given away – the latter during the brothers' lifetimes.<sup>43</sup> Three studies of heads and a still life with birds' nests entered the collection of the French critic Albert Aurier (1865–1892),<sup>44</sup> and a Nuenen still life with a Paris self-portrait on the back came into the possession of Vincent's sister, Elisabeth du Quesne-van Gogh (1859–1936).<sup>45</sup>

Sales from the family collection probably took place at a later date.<sup>46</sup> Theo's widow, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (1862–1925) tried to sell several Dutch works at exhibitions, but the Nuenen paintings were not as popular as those from his French period. Apart from a colourful study of a head (cat. 13) and three still lifes of 1885 (cats. 32, 33, 35), which were frequently exhibited from 1905 on, most of them were only very occasionally selected for commercial exhibition.

As far as is known, Johanna chose only two paintings from Vincent's Dutch period to hang on the walls of her home in Bussum, and later in Amsterdam. *The potato eaters* (cat. 26) was placed over the fireplace, probably following the lead set by Theo in their Paris apartment. The second painting was *Vase with honesty* (cat. 8), which Johanna hung above her writing-desk, as can be seen in a photograph of the interior of her house in Amsterdam's Brachthuijzerstraat (fig. 6).<sup>47</sup> She was determined to hold on to them, and they were the only two Dutch paintings which she labelled as not being for sale at exhibitions of her collection.<sup>48</sup>

Johanna sold at least four of the Dutch works: one in 1903, two in 1905 and one in 1924.<sup>49</sup> The vibrant *Avenue of poplars* (fig. 4) was acquired in 1905 by the Friends of the Boymans Museum in Rotterdam, making it the first of Van Gogh's works to enter a Dutch museum.<sup>50</sup> Johanna organised a retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum

in Amsterdam in 1905, and when it closed she sold *Sunset* (fig. 7) to W.P. Ingenegeren (1853–1930), director of the Utrecht life insurance company.<sup>51</sup> An army officer from The Hague, A.W. den Beer Poortugael (1864–1940), bought the *Bowl of pears* on the same occasion.<sup>52</sup> The last work that Johanna sold was a study of a head, which was bought by a Mrs Fleming in 1924 at a commercial exhibition in the Leicester Galleries organised by the London art dealers Ernest Brown & Phillips.<sup>53</sup>

Although Vincent Willem van Gogh (1890–1978) decided a year after his mother's death in 1925 not to sell anything more from the collection, he too allowed a few studies to leave.<sup>54</sup> In 1931 he sold the head of a man to the Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts in Brussels (fig. 8), probably swayed by the argument that there was not a single Van Gogh in a Belgian museum.<sup>55</sup> He was also persuaded to sell Vincent's *View of the Singel in Amsterdam* to W.J.R. Dreesmann, the department store owner and collector of Amsterdam cityscapes.<sup>56</sup> The third and last work to leave the collection was not sold but given away. In 1945, Vincent Willem van Gogh presented D. de Wolff Peerenboom with a study of a woman's head in thanks for what he had done for the Van Gogh family, 'being of great assistance on several occasions by supplying us with provisions during the past wartime winter.'<sup>57</sup>

#### ACQUISITIONS

The Van Gogh family collection, which was given on permanent loan to the state in 1962, contains the world's largest and finest survey of Van Gogh's Dutch œuvre. Originally, it had none of the Hague works, nor were there any paintings from 1884, when Van Gogh



6 Interior of Johanna's house in Brachthuizerstraat, Amsterdam.  
Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum. Vase  
with honesty is above and to the left of  
the desk.

Dominee, journalist en museumdirecteur, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 71–72.

51 See W.P. van Ingenegeren's letter of 7 August 1905 (inv. b 1964 V/1962).

52 See the letters from A.W. den Beer Poortugael to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger dated 18 and 27 October and 17 November 1905 (inv. b 1930–1932 V/1962).

53 F 140 JH 745. See Sales at Vincent van Gogh exhibition, no. 21 (inv. b 5911 V/1996).

54 In a letter to W. Steenhoff dated 16 June 1926 (archives of the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam) he stated that he 'will no longer [...] sell'; see Heijbroek 1991, p. 216, note 142.

55 F 163 JH 687. There are no known documents relating to this sale; see however De la Faille 1970, p. 617.

56 F 113 JH 944 (reproduced as fig. 41a in cat. 41). There is no substantiation for this sale either. It is merely mentioned in De la Faille 1970, p. 616.

57 Letter from V.W. van Gogh dated 27 July 1945.

58 There are only three paintings in the present collection that could possibly have been made at the end of 1884: a still life and two studies of heads (cats. 9–11).

59 The *View of the IJ* (F 114 JH 945) was purchased in 1982. It was supposedly painted in October 1885 but has since been removed from the œuvre. See the catalogue appendix, Rejected works.

60 See cat. 1, esp. note 14. One feature of the paintings in the museum's collection that came from Oldenzeel is that they are on panel (apart from the *Flying fox* [cat. 44]). This support was probably added in 1902, shortly before the then owner offered the group to Oldenzeel.

See cat. 2, esp. note 32. The panel of *View of the sea at Scheveningen* (cat. 2) was removed at some stage; it is now on canvas.

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was concentrating on his depictions of weavers and making his first attempts to master the colour theory expounded in Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des art du dessin*.<sup>58</sup> As noted above, the relationship between him and his brother had cooled that year, so he sent Theo nothing. Nor did he in the summer of 1885, when he was painting cottages (fig. 3), which were initially intended for Theo but eventually went to the colourman Leurs.

These omissions have to some extent been remedied by purchases and bequests. The Van Gogh Museum is now able to display two of the Hague works. In 1960, the Vincent van Gogh Foundation acquired the *Still life with cabbage and clogs* (cat. 1) of late 1881, which is one of Vincent's earliest paintings and was executed under the tutelage of Anton Mauve. It got a companion in 1989 when the Social Democrat politician Elisabeth Ribbius Peletier (1891-1989) left her *View of the sea at Scheveningen* to the museum. This is an engaging and typical example of Van Gogh's experiments of 1882, when he was discovering what he could and could not do in a medium that was new to him.

Van Gogh's Nuenen period was enriched with five paintings. Vincent Willem van Gogh succeeded in adding the *Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen* (cat. 6) to the family collection in 1958, giving it its first and only example of Van Gogh's achievements in paint at the beginning of 1884. This small but charming work, which is also interesting from a biographical point of view, did not remain in isolation after the collection was transferred to the museum. In 1976, the quite large *Avenue of poplars in autumn* (cat. 7), also of 1884, was acquired with the assistance of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the Vereniging Rembrandt. H.A.D Thomas, an Amsterdam dentist, bequeathed an unfinished study of a head (cat. 19) to the foundation in 1965, and in 1995 the psychiatrist Margo Rehfisch (1908-1994) left the *Woman lifting potatoes* of 1885 to the Dutch state (cat. 29). The latter is a typical example of Van Gogh's figure exercises from the period following the completion of *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), and may have been one of the pieces sent to Leurs. The *Flying fox* (cat. 44), finally, was an unexpected addition to the Nuenen group. The museum bought it in Paris in 1973 as a painting executed in Paris in 1886, but it is now dated to the closing months of Van Gogh's stay in Nuenen.<sup>59</sup>

The works acquired by purchase or bequest naturally have a different provenance from those in Theo's collection. With the exception of the *Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen* (cat. 6), they came from the group of at least 100 paintings (and many drawings) that Vincent left behind in Nuenen when he moved to Antwerp in November 1885.<sup>60</sup> His mother took them with her when she went to live in Breda, and stored them with a carpenter there. They were then forgotten and only resurfaced in 1903 when the Oldenzeel Galleries in Rotterdam offered some for sale. Johanna van Gogh-Bonger made an attempt to track down their provenance but was unable to add any of them to the collection.

One wonders whether Vincent would even have wanted her to do so. Although the collection left behind in Nuenen included the paintings of 1884 that were intended for Theo but never sent, the bulk of it consisted of studies which he would not have rated

very highly. He could have mailed them, but did not do so, which means that he did not regard as being part of the ‘nucleus to be gradually enlarged as we progressed’ [531/422] – the nucleus, a little diluted but substantially intact, that eventually found its way to the Van Gogh Museum.



7 *Sunset* (F 191 JH 762), 1885.  
Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.



8 *Head* (F 163 JH 687), 1885. Brussels,  
Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts.

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# Van Gogh and his painting materials.

## An introduction

The data included in this introduction are based on the technical research carried out by Cornelia Peres and Marije Vellekoop; see further the 'Acknowledgements' and the 'Note to the reader' preceding the catalogue section.

1 See cat. 1, note 2.

2 Van Gogh had made an initial attempt to paint at the beginning of 1882 (see letter 255/223). See Drawings 1, pp. 21-24, for his use of the perspective frame.

3 Letters 265/231 and 369/304.

4 See letters 363/299, 365/300, 366/301, 368/303, among others.

5 See the essay 'five parcels and three crates'.

6 On these brushes see cat. 2, note 10.

7 Van Gogh had painted on canvas when taking lessons from Mauve at the end of 1881; see cat. 1, note 4. He reports that he was using paper, not cardboard, in letters 256/224 and 259/226. Further research is required to discover whether he also used paper pasted onto cardboard.

8 He speaks of 'a sheet of oiled torchon' in letter 260/227. See also Drawings 1, pp. 26, 194-96, for his use of oil paint on watercolour paper.

9 The word 'board' might possibly be interpreted as panel, but in the same letter he states that he had not yet tried out wood as a support.

10 In the same letter he describes a beach scene that had turned out well: 'I just wish I had painted it on canvas or panel' [261/228].

In 1879, when Van Gogh resolved to become an artist, he had absolutely no technical knowledge at all. He had made the occasional drawing, but that was the limit of his experience. At first he concentrated on learning the basic principles of drawing and watercolour, and it was only at the end of August 1881, when the landscape painter Anton Mauve (1838-1888) advised him to try his hand at painting, that he thought about expanding his horizons.<sup>1</sup> Mauve promised to give him advice, and in late November or early December Van Gogh made his first paintings in his teacher's studio. They were still lifes (cat. 1), and taught him 'something practical about colour and the use of the brush' [190/163].

Van Gogh did not put his newly gained knowledge into practice straight away. His personal circumstances changed (there was an argument with his parents at Christmas, and he returned to The Hague dejected and penniless), and he was afraid to confront this new and expensive challenge. It was not until the summer of 1882 that he took up the palette again, after his brother Theo had given him some extra money. On Monday 7 August, armed with a perspective frame, he began to 'paint small studies' [255/223].<sup>2</sup>

This renewed trial with painting lasted considerably longer than his first foray, and initially consisted of an exploration of his own abilities. Mauve had broken off contact with Van Gogh, who now followed his intuition, without any clear-cut plan. He was enthralled by the effects of nature, and tried to imitate them as best he could: 'if it's impossible then it's impossible – I want to try it out, even though I don't know how it ought to be done. *I don't know myself* how I paint. I sit down with a white board before the spot that has caught my fancy – I look at what is before my eyes – and tell myself: That white board has got to become something' [261/228]. His aim was 'to learn from this landscape painting a few things about technique which I feel I need for my various MATERIALS, and the TONE and the COLOUR. In a word to express the body, the mass, of things' [255/223].

After a few months, however, shortage of money forced him to fall back on drawing again,<sup>3</sup> and he did not return to the brush until late summer 1883, towards the end of his stay in The Hague. His experimental phase was now behind him: 'To paint a great deal is now [...] something that cannot be put off any longer' [382/317]. He planned to make 'one hundred serious studies' [383/318], and sought advice from the artists Théophile de Bock (1851-1904), Bernardus Blommers (1845-1914) and Herman van der Weele (1852-1930).<sup>4</sup> The latter was the only one who gave him any real assistance. Van der Weele went through the studies one by one in Van Gogh's studio 'to give me some pointers in technique,' and they then corrected some of them together [383/318].

Although Van Gogh continued drawing, his main concern from now on was painting. It was basically the focus of his work in the province of Drenthe, where he stayed from September to November 1883, and in Nuenen, where he returned to his parental home at the beginning of December. One activity that typified his ambition and thirst for knowledge was making numerous exercises on just one theme (heads, or still lifes) in an attempt to establish a technical routine. He was also setting his sights even higher: 'I always do what I can't yet do, in order to learn how' [529/R57].

Van Gogh's self-assurance grew slowly but surely during this learning process. At first he regarded his paintings merely as exercises for mastering his craft, and invariably called them studies. Most were small and were intended for studio use, but this changed in early 1884. He was hoping that he could sell his work.<sup>5</sup> It was only in the spring of 1885, after Theo had commented favourably on his progress for the first time, that Van Gogh thought that he really had put his study phase behind him. He was now trying to produce mature, finished works. The results were *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), *The cottage* (cat. 27) and *The old church tower at Nuenen* (cat. 28), which he pointedly called 'paintings'.

#### PAINTING MATERIALS

Mauve gave Van Gogh his first materials at the end of December 1881: 'a paint-box with paint, brushes, palette, palette knife, oil, turpentine – in short, everything I need' [192/165]. Around the beginning of August 1882 he bought more 'paper and paint and brushes,' which gave him a serviceable if basic set of equipment: 'I now have all that is absolutely essential for painting' [252/220 and 254/222]. He had what were called 'Lyons brushes' [259/226] – simple, flat brushes made of pig bristles (fig. 9). However, they were unsuitable for details and staffage,<sup>6</sup> producing 'strokes and accents that are too broad,' as is very apparent in *View of the sea at Scheveningen* (cat. 2). He wanted to add some sable brushes, 'which I have discovered to be the real drawing brushes for drawing a hand or a profile in colour' [259/226].

Van Gogh first practised on cheap painter's paper,<sup>7</sup> but occasionally used water-colour paper, which he coated with oil to make it non-absorbent.<sup>8</sup> He attached the paper to a drawing board, and there is an indirect reference to this in the letter quoted above, where he speaks of a 'white board' on which the scene was executed [261/288].<sup>9</sup> There was an alternative when Van Gogh spent the day working outdoors. He probably found it awkward to lug the board around, so he pinned his paper 'to a frame covered with canvas, which is easy to carry,' as he wrote in September 1882 [256/224].

In the beginning Van Gogh did not use painter's canvas. 'If I were to paint on panel or canvas, my expenses would again increase,' he lamented in early September 1882 [261/228].<sup>10</sup> He probably bought canvas for the first time late in the summer of 1883, when he returned to painting after a long break. The time had evidently arrived to adopt a more professional approach.<sup>11</sup> This probably included the purchase of canvas and of a light-weight easel for use out of doors. He found the latter 'very convenient, because one never

<sup>11</sup> The first mention of purchasing canvas comes in letter 372/307.

It emerges from letter 261/228, however, that Van Gogh must have had canvas at an earlier date. According to the descriptions of the supports in the œuvre catalogues, Van Gogh painted several canvases during his Hague period. This should be treated with great caution, for on closer examination it turns out that the 'canvas' is in fact paper (see cat. 2).

<sup>12</sup> He had started work on the scene just before a 'violent thunderstorm with a terrific cloudburst,' and sheltered for an hour before finishing it in the mud. The painting has not been identified.

<sup>13</sup> The Hague, City Archives, Adresboek 1881-82. His shop was at Hofsingel 1.

<sup>14</sup> Paillard and Bourgeois were the names of French colour-makers. For the latter see David Bomford et al., Art in the making. Impressionism, London and New Haven 1990, pp. 34, 36. It is clear from the letter quoted that Van Gogh twice made this request to Theo.

<sup>15</sup> Van Gogh gave lessons to Furnée's son; for further details see Martha Op de Coul and Annet Tellegen, 'Vincent van Gogh en Antoine Furnée,' Oud-Holland 109 (1995), pp. 95-96.

<sup>16</sup> Van Gogh mentions just these three sums in letter 527/420, but without attaching names to them. It is known from letter 524/419a, however, that he owed Leurs 25 guilders. These were not old debts run up in The Hague or Drenthe; the two suppliers had been paid off at the beginning of 1884 (see letter 430/360). He wrote to Furnée saying that his current debts were partly due to the cost of the paints 'I got from you and Leurs last year' [524/419a].

<sup>17</sup> J.T.M. Melissen of the Eindhoven Regional Archives kindly supplied this information about Baijens's shop in a letter of 25 February 1999.

<sup>18</sup> See letters 481/-, 545/434, 549/438. He may also have got paint from his pupils in Eindhoven. He certainly asked for tubes as payment for his lessons (letter 427/386).

<sup>19</sup> The paint was later sent to him: 'Today I received and paid for the supply

of colours which they forwarded to me from Eindhoven' [549/438]. Analysis of paint samples has revealed that the colours were finely ground, meaning that they were made mechanically, although coarser pigments were also found here and there.

20 The quotation is from a letter written by Kerssemakers on 22 August 1912 (present whereabouts unknown, copy in the Van Gogh Museum) about F 67a JH 602, which he owned.

21 Letter 535/424.

22 See cat. 41, note 13.

23 See the letter of 23 June 1914 from Kerssemakers to Johan Briedé (inv. b 1423 V/1974).

24 He only occasionally painted on paper or cardboard in Drenthe and Nuenen (F 81 JH 695, F 98 JH 901, F 191 JH 762, F 144a JH 704, F 185 JH 484). It is easy to be misled by the fact that the structure of the paper imitates canvas.

25 It is as well to realise that the descriptions of the supports in the œuvre catalogues are not always correct. 'Panel,' for instance, sometimes turns out to be canvas pasted onto panel.

26 See Bomford 1990, op. cit. (note 14), p. 46, for the standard sizes.

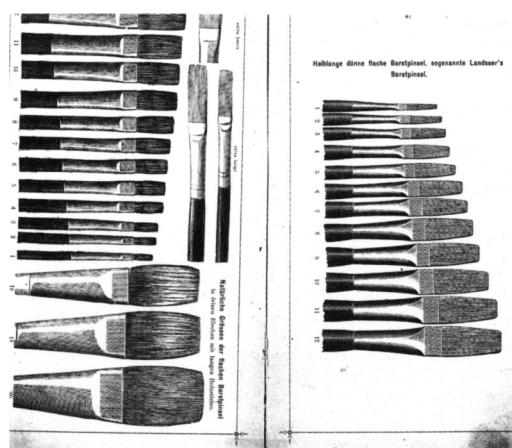
27 Letter 545/434; De Brouwer 1984, pp. 26–27, 100–01, and Drawings 11,

gets dirtier than when one works on one's knees out of doors' [372/307]. He had evidently done just that in the preceding period, for in a letter of 1882 he admits that he had made a landscape 'kneeling in the mud' [260/277].<sup>12</sup>

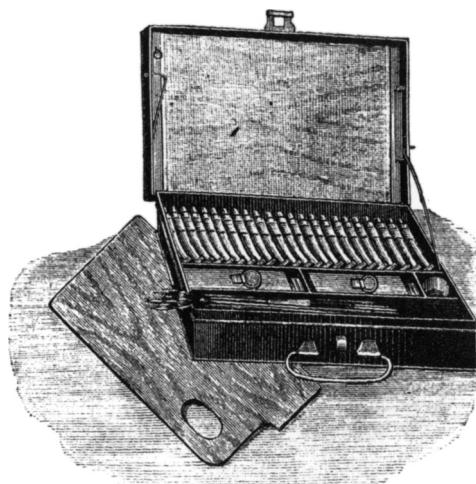
#### SUPPLIERS

When he was living in The Hague, Van Gogh initially bought his painting materials solely from Wilhelmus Johannes Leurs (1828–1895), 'frame-maker and dealer in artists' requisites'.<sup>13</sup> He tried to be as thrifty as possible, and only bought 'large tubes (which work out far cheaper than the small ones)' [254/222]. As he wrote in 1883, he paid 'the retail price' [369/304]. On two occasions he asked Theo to get hold of paint in Paris, 'for the wholesale price, in other words from the manufacturer. [...] Paillard or Bourgeois or someone else – it doesn't matter. As an art dealer, you might perhaps be entitled to the wholesale price' [369/304].<sup>14</sup> Both requests went unanswered, so Van Gogh took action himself. He discovered that he could get old tubes at cost price from Hendrik Jan Furnée (1833–1894), a druggist in The Hague's Korte Poten who sold artists' materials.<sup>15</sup> 'I'm taking almost 300 tubes from him,' Vincent wrote to Theo at the end of July 1883 [372/307].

It is not known whether Van Gogh actually bought them, but it seems unlikely, because when he arrived in Drenthe in mid-September 1883 he only had enough paint 'for about 6 studies' [390/325]. That was too little, of course, so he was hoping to buy '2 batches of old paint which are just damaged on the outside' from his Hague suppliers [394/329]. This included the paint from Furnée: 'What I wanted to get from him is also part of the same batch, about half of it, so it is again a question of cash. Then brushes, another small paint-box and a portfolio for studies, and other things – I get more favourable terms if I pay cash, and then I have no further worries.'



9 Photograph from the *Preis-courant von D<sup>r</sup>. Fr. Schoenfeld & C<sup>o</sup>* in Düsseldorf, 1891.



10 Photograph from the *Preis-courant von D<sup>r</sup>. Fr. Schoenfeld & C<sup>o</sup>* in Düsseldorf, 1891.

Van Gogh used the same two suppliers when he was living in Nuenen. In September 1885 it turned out that he owed a lot of money to both of them: 25 guilders to Leurs and 45 (or 30) guilders to Furnée.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime he had also run up a bill with a third, unidentified supplier, probably Jan Baijens (1838-1914) in Rechtstraat in Eindhoven, to whom he owed 30 (or 45) guilders.<sup>17</sup> Baijens had a shop selling art supplies, glass and household goods, and Van Gogh bought canvas and probably paint that was not machine-made, unlike the paint he bought in The Hague.<sup>18</sup> When he left for Antwerp in November 1885 he wanted to take a stock ‘of that pigment that I can easily ask someone to grind here’ [545/434].<sup>19</sup> His friend Anton Kerssemakers (1846-1924) knew that Van Gogh bought this hand-ground paint in order to economise: ‘Since he was too poor to buy good tubes, he used home-ground white’.<sup>20</sup>

It is also known that he placed at least one order with the firm of Schönfeld in Düsseldorf during his Nuenen period. In September 1885 he took delivery of several pigments that were difficult to obtain, among them mineral blue.<sup>21</sup> Kerssemakers recalled that he had also ordered a ‘small paint-box [...] of lacquered tin’ (fig. 10), probably on the same occasion.<sup>22</sup> That foreign order was probably an exception, for his friend remembered that it had been a complicated business.<sup>23</sup>

#### CANVAS AND FRAMES

Van Gogh had painted on paper in The Hague, but from 1883 his preferred support was canvas.<sup>24</sup> He occasionally used panel, but with the exception of two small Amsterdam cityscapes (see cat. 41) this was probably due to a lack of canvas.<sup>25</sup> That was also the reason why he painted over several earlier works (cats. 19, 27, 31, 32, 35, 36, 37, 38, 40, 44), especially in the summer of 1885, when he was very short of money.

It was possible to get ready-made, primed canvas on strainers or stretchers, but Van Gogh made no use of them during his Dutch period. A cheaper alternative was to buy primed canvas by the metre, and a letter of early 1885 shows that that is what he did. He intended to buy ‘a full metre of that canvas of Baijens’s’ in Eindhoven [481/-]. In addition, the sizes of his works do not match the dimensions of the standard frames of the day.<sup>26</sup> He had frames made in Nuenen by the carpenter and contractor De Vries, and when he left in November he took no fewer than 40 with him.<sup>27</sup> It is not known whether they were strainers or stretchers; examples of both have survived. *Cottages* of 1885 is attached to an original strainer (figs. 11, 12), while *Congregation leaving the Reformed church at Nuenen* has its first stretcher (cat. 6, fig. 6e).<sup>28</sup>

The canvas edges supply further clues as to Van Gogh’s working method. Eighteen of the museum’s works have clean-cut edges and were probably trimmed at a later date, so it is impossible to say how they were originally attached (cats. 3-5, 7, 10, 12, 14-16, 18, 19, 21-23, 29, 34, 36, 43). Fourteen have their original tacking edges, which means that they were fastened to a frame while they were painted (cats. 6, 13, 26-28, 30-33, 35, 39, 40, 42, 44).<sup>29</sup> Nine, finally, have original edges but no tacking edges, so they were evidently painted as

pp. 18-19.

28 Both frames have paint splashes and traces of brushstrokes, probably because Van Gogh wiped his brush on them. For Cottages see the conservation report by Pippa Balch, Stichting Kollektief Restauratieatelier Amsterdam, 3 February 1997, p. 1.

29 It could be inferred from the inventory of Theo’s collection drawn up by Andries Bonger around 1890 (Catalogue des œuvres de Vincent van Gogh, inv. b 3055 V/1962) that 14 paintings from the Dutch period were stretched at that time. The list assigns 38 works to the Dutch period (including three that were probably made in Antwerp). The loose canvases, 21 in all, are mentioned separately (nos. 13, consisting of 20 works, and 16<sup>bis</sup>). The other paintings were evidently on stretchers (or pasted onto panel, as may have been the case with no. 12 [cat. 12]). Those 14 works include two that were later sold (nos. 3 and 9).

30 One possibility is that these were on canvas mounted on cardboard, which was available commercially (see Willem E. Roelofs Jr. De praktijk van het schilderen. Wenken aan collega’s door een kunstschilder, The Hague [1919], p. 38). The cardboard must have been removed later. Only a few canvases were subsequently put on stretchers. One such is a study of a head painted in March 1885 (cat. 13); the scene extends to the edges of the canvas and there are nail holes in the paint surface.

31 Van Gogh mentions no canvas in his letters, but since he was negotiating with both Furnée and Leurs he must have bought some from one of them.

32 For exceptions see cats. 21, 22 and 37.

33 The priming of flying fox is the only example of cream-grey. Analysis of paint samples, however, shows that three works had ochre in the ground (cats. 1, 17, 31).

34 Cat. 34 is an exception.

35 Roelofs 1919, op. cit. (note 30), p. 34.

36 See Derkert 1946 for Van Gogh’s Dutch palette.

37 Armand Cassagne, Traité d’aquarelle, Paris 1875, pp. 64-74, esp. p. 72.

38 On Van Gogh’s use of varnish see

Cornelia Peres, 'On egg-white coatings,' in: *Cornelia Peres et al., A closer look. Technical and art-historical studies on works by Van Gogh and Gauguin, Zwolle 1991*, pp. 40-41, and *Hummelen/Peres 1993*, pp. 62-64.

39 This information only became available after the catalogue entry had been written.

40 See Peres 1991, *op. cit.* (note 38), p. 40.

41 See further cat. 26, note 15.

42 *Hummelen/Peres 1993*, pp. 55-57.

43 See further cat. 8, note 9, and cats. 10-18, note 18.

44 It is not known where Van Gogh got this information from. It is true that scraping off a thick paint layer is recommended in Karl Robert, *Traité pratique de peinture à huile*. *Paysage* (Paris 1884), which Van Gogh had read, but the writer did so for a very different reason. It was intended for an ébauche, to remove irregularities from the paint surface before finishing the scene (p. 60).

45 Letter of 1917 from Willem Steenhoff to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, inv. b 5605 V/1996.

46 Memorandum of V.W. van Gogh, 13 November 1974.

47 Most of the treatments were then carried out by the conservators of the Stedelijk Museum, to which the paintings had been given on loan in 1930. In 1957, moreover, the museum acquired its own professional conservation studio.

48 See the preceding essay, 'Five parcels and three crates'.

49 Catalogue des œuvres de Vincent van Gogh, inv. b 3055 V/1962, nos. 13, listing 20 works, and 16<sup>bis</sup>.

50 The quotation is from 'Vincent van Gogh. *Zelfportretten ontdekt*', Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant, 13 December 1929.

51 The other one is cat. 36. There is documentation that many canvases were originally attached to cardboard, and that can be assumed of other works as well. They have traces of fairly sharp folds in the paint at the corners that indicate that they were bent at those points. Such folds can only come about if the canvas was pasted onto cardboard. These pictures

loose canvases (cats. 8, 9, 11, 17, 20, 24, 25, 37, 38). Van Gogh must have attached them to a frame or a drawing board, and many have small holes left by drawing pins or nails, or both (cats. 9, 17, 20, 24, 25, 38). There are exceptions (cats. 8, 11, 37), and it is simply not known how they were attached to a support.<sup>30</sup>

#### CANVAS TYPES

A description of the types of canvas that Van Gogh used is included in the catalogue section in order to give an idea of the kinds of material he employed. The results are not easy to interpret, for knowledge of this subject is too fragmentary. The Van Gogh Museum has no more than roughly one quarter of the works painted in the Netherlands, so the available data have to be treated with great caution.

All three paintings from Drenthe (cats. 3-5) are on the same kind of fine canvas. They could have come from the same roll, which Van Gogh probably ordered from Leurs or Furnée.<sup>31</sup> He used various fabrics during his Nuenen period – all of good quality and certainly not cheap. They have a regular weave and contain no weaving faults. In principle one can distinguish 14 different kinds, but this is of little help in dating the works.<sup>32</sup> The differences are minor, and only the canvases of *Still life with earthenware and bottles* (cat. 36) and *Flying fox* (cat. 44) are markedly deviant, both having a far finer structure than all the rest.

The grounds on most of the canvases look cream-coloured.<sup>33</sup> The structure is generally dense and homogeneous, and this together with the regular way it was applied points to mechanical production, with only the thickness differing slightly.<sup>34</sup> Analysis of several paint samples revealed that the ground is composed of chalk, white filler and zinc white, occasionally with an admixture of white pipe clay or lead white (or both). This is a perfectly normal combination.<sup>35</sup>

#### PRELIMINARY DRAWING

Van Gogh began his figure pieces of 1882 by making a sketch in charcoal or chalk. He became totally confused when he lost that drawing 'while painting' [373/308], which was of course inevitable with his impasted manner. A year later, though, he had gained experience, and 'could not care less if the drawing is obliterated' [373/308]. He added that he made his design 'directly with the brush.' This was repeated at the end of his stay in Nuenen. 'Nowadays I like nothing better than working with the brush, drawing with it too, instead of making a sketch in charcoal. [...] But I believe that most of them [the old masters] began, continued and finished with their brush. They did not fill in' [542/431].

Despite this assertion, Van Gogh did occasionally make preliminary designs with pencil, charcoal or chalk throughout his Dutch period. Parts of them are occasionally visible to the naked eye, some only with the microscope (cats. 1, 11, 20, 42, 43). All the paintings in the collection were examined with infrared reflectography, but the results were disappointing. The infrared was generally unable to penetrate Van Gogh's often

thick and dark paint layers and reflect back lines on a white ground. New traces of an underdrawing were found on just one work (cat. 22). In *Still life with Bible*, which is thinly painted, infrared reflectography did give a clearer picture of the design than could be obtained with the naked eye or the microscope.

*do not have the craquelure patterns typical of canvas supports.*

52 See note 44.

53 See note 37.

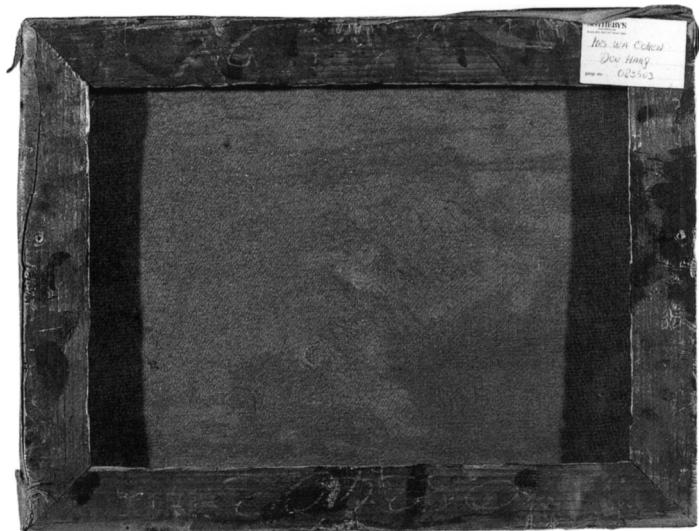
#### COLOUR THEORY

Van Gogh chose the colours for his palette in 1882 (fig. 13), and they remained basically the same throughout his Dutch years.<sup>36</sup> He had ‘a practical palette, with healthy colours’ [254/222] consisting of various gradations of blue, red and yellow, supplemented with black and white. He probably learned the basic principles of mixing colours from Armand Cassagne’s *Traité d'aquarelle*.<sup>37</sup> ‘There are only three fundamental colours – red, yellow and blue. The composites are orange, green and purple. By adding black and some white one gets endless varieties of grey: *red-grey*, *yellow-grey*, *blue-grey*, *green-grey*, *orange-grey*, *violet-grey*’ [253/221].

From the summer of 1883 Van Gogh had a preference for strong contrasts of light and shade, and gradually realised that he should not try to reproduce the local tone, that is to say the real colour of objects seen independently of their surroundings. Gradations of light are relative. A grey set against darker shades appears light. Van Gogh followed



11 Vincent van Gogh, *Cottages* (F - JH addendum 23), 1885. Private collection.

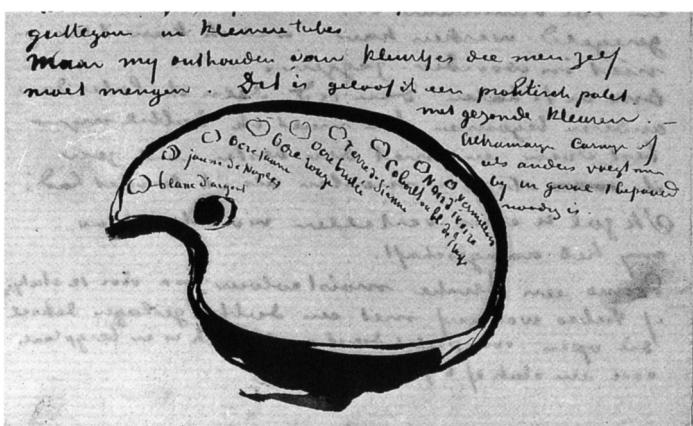


12 Reverse of fig. 11.

the advice of his friend Anthon van Rappard (1858-1892) ‘to begin [a painting] in a low key’ which was then gradually raised [451/R50]. *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), for instance, was in ‘such a low scale of colours that the light ones would look like ink stains if they were smeared onto white paper. On the canvas they stand out as lights because of the great forces ranged against them,’ as he wrote in 1885 [529/R57].

This principle led him to make rather dark scenes, but after reading Charles Blanc’s *Les artistes de mon temps* in the late summer of 1884, and especially his *Grammaire des arts du dessin, architecture, sculpture, peinture*, his works suddenly became more colourful (cat. 7). From then on he took a keen interest in the laws of colour, and was fascinated by Blanc’s explanation of complementary contrasts. These are formed between the primary colours – red, yellow and blue – and their respective opposites on the colour circle: green, purple and orange. Van Gogh also learned about the use of ‘ton rompu’. A broken colour is obtained by mixing two complementaries. An equal mixture of green and red produces grey. If the proportions are not equal one gets red-grey or green-grey. Pure colours placed side by side reinforce each other, but an unequal mixture weakens the contrast.

Van Gogh tried to put these laws into practice, making both tonal paintings and works dominated by colour contrasts, and endeavoured to combine both principles. Despite this use of colour, his paintings remained dark, that is until a visit to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in early October 1885, when his palette suddenly ‘began to thaw’ [540/429]. He observed with satisfaction that his study of colour had borne fruit. He was now able to ‘paint a given object, whatever its shape and colour, without hesitation’ [540/429]. Or, as he wrote in connection with *Autumn landscape* (fig. 5): ‘Well, never



13 Sketch in a letter to Theo of c. 5  
August 1882 (254/222). Amsterdam,  
Van Gogh Museum.

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have I felt so convinced that I will make things that do well, that I shall succeed in calculating my colours in such a way that I have it in my power to make the right effect'  
[542/431].

#### VARNISHES

Van Gogh preferred to see his paintings varnished, which was in line with the ideas of his day. 'Before you show them to Portier or Serret,' he wrote to Theo at the beginning of June about *The cottage* (cat. 27) and *The old church tower at Nuenen* (cat. 28), 'I'd very much like you to give both pictures a coat of varnish' [510/411]. He expressed the same wish in October 1885 about some still lifes he was sending to his brother: 'They will sink in after a while, but in a year or so they will be better than they are now if, being dry to the core, they get a solid varnish' [537/426].

Van Gogh found varnish particularly important for bringing his dark colours to life.<sup>38</sup> His earth pigments and Prussian blue have a high content of binding medium, and thus ran the risk of darkening rapidly. Van Gogh accordingly recommended varnish – or egg white, the traditional alternative – in order to preserve the nuances in the darker passages. He said of several (now unidentifiable) works from his stay in Drenthe: 'The smallest one has become particularly matt. Brush it over with the white of an egg in a week or so, or with a little varnish in a month, to restore the colour' [392/327].

These two excerpts from the letters suggest that Vincent left the varnishing of his works to Theo in Paris, but that is not so. One of his studies of heads has its original varnish, which was probably applied before he sent it to his brother (cat. 16). Analysis of a paint sample revealed that the interior of a weaver's cottage over which Van Gogh painted *Birds' nests* (cat. 38) was likewise covered with a layer of varnish.<sup>39</sup>

Van Gogh also applied intermediate varnishes. This involved coating a paint layer that was still wet with varnish or egg white to provide protection against a new layer, or to make a second layer adhere better to one that had already dried.<sup>40</sup> Writing about *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), he said that he was going to 'refresh [the painting] with egg white' before finishing the details [501/404].<sup>41</sup>

Spurred by his fear of losing the colour nuances in his darker paintings, and by his desire for highly saturated colours, Van Gogh mixed copaiba balsam into his paint, probably starting in October 1884.<sup>42</sup> The balsam stays glossy when dry, and by adding it to oil paint Van Gogh hoped to prevent the colours becoming matt. Since the balsam never dries completely, the paint remains soft, and if used to excess it causes wrinkles and drips in the paint surface.<sup>43</sup>

Oddly enough, Van Gogh describes his impasted manner as a way of preventing the sinking-in of the darker colours that he so feared. 'Don't let it trouble you,' he wrote to Theo in 1885 about the still lives he had sent, 'when I leave brush strokes in my studies just as I put them on, with smaller or larger clots of paint. That doesn't matter at all; if one leaves them (a year or half a year is enough) and then scrapes them off quickly with a

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razor, one gets a much more solid colour than would be the case after painting thinly. To conserve and keep its colours fresh, it is necessary that the light parts be painted solidly. And this scraping off has been done by the old masters as well as by the French painters of today' [541/430].<sup>44</sup>

#### CONSERVATION

Little is known about the conservation history of the paintings. If they were ever restored while Theo and later Johanna van Gogh-Bonger were looking after the collection it was probably only on an incidental basis. Willem Steenhoff (1863-1932), director of the Mesdag Museum in The Hague, persuaded Johanna's son Vincent Willem in 1926 that the collection should be treated systematically. In 1917, before lending several works to the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, Steenhoff wrote to Johanna 'that it is very desirable after all to have them cleaned as a matter of policy,' but that recommendation was not followed.<sup>45</sup> Steenhoff proposed that J.C. Traas (1898-1984) be 'trained in the studio of the Mesdag Museum [...], and allowed to start with simple things.' Traas was a gallery attendant in the Mesdag Museum who had been 'declared unfit for the military police because of a gunshot wound in the leg (or something of that nature).'<sup>46</sup> After a short period of training under Steenhoff's supervision, he began to conserve the paintings on his own. His services were employed up until the Second World War, but decreasingly thereafter.<sup>47</sup>

One of Traas's most important actions was the removal of supports. Van Gogh had sent many of his paintings to Theo without either a strainer or a stretcher.<sup>48</sup> The precise number is not known, but when Andries Bonger inventoried Theo's collection around 1890, he wrote that the Dutch paintings included 21 'toiles volantes'.<sup>49</sup> At some stage when Johanna van Gogh-Bonger had custody of the collection, these works were given a support as a protective measure. It turned out that '20' works had been pasted onto cardboard when Traas set to work in 1929 (probably *cats. 3, 5, 8-10, 11, 14, 15, 17, 18, 20, 23-25, 34, 36-38, 43*).<sup>50</sup> Three canvases had been pasted onto panel, one of them being the signed portrait study that Theo had rolled up and taken back to Paris in March 1884 (*cat. 12*).<sup>51</sup>

Traas's treatment included replacing the cardboard and panel supports with canvas and then fastening the works to stretchers. However, he also relined paintings that had already been stretched – and that was continued by the conservators in the Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, where the collection was treated from the end of the 1950s. As a result, all the Dutch paintings in the museum's collection are relined, with the exception of those painted on both sides (*cats. 9, 16-18, 25, 38*). Traas did not trim off the tacking edges when he carried out those relinings, so they are still intact.

Traas generally varnished the paintings, as was customary at the time. The application of this protective coating was by no means standard practice while Johanna was looking after the collection. In 1917, Steenhoff had suggested having several paintings cleaned, and added: 'This is separate from the question of varnishing (an extremely thin

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layer). I know that you are completely against it.<sup>52</sup> This may have applied solely to the works from Van Gogh's French period, but it is revealing that Johanna wanted to do justice to Van Gogh's later opinion, which was influenced by the Post-Impressionists, namely that the paint surface should be matt and thus unvarnished, which was at odds with his ideas while in Holland.<sup>53</sup>

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# Note to the reader

*Each catalogue entry consists of a documentation section and a discussion of the painting. The documentation lists the date of the work, its dimensions, inventory number, numbers in the œuvre catalogues, technique, provenance, the relevant letters in Van Gogh's correspondence, and lists of literature and exhibitions. Reference is made only to those letters in which Van Gogh specifically mentions a particular painting. The literature is restricted to publications with pertinent information about the work under discussion. If no location is given for documents and letters referred to in the notes, the original or a copy is in the Van Gogh Museum. Underdrawings revealed with the aid of infrared reflectography are labelled IRR in the technical section.*

*Publications and exhibitions are cited in short-title form in both the discussions and the documentation. The full titles and information about the exhibitions will be found at the back of the book. The F numbers refer to the relevant catalogue numbers in J.-B. de la Faille, *The works of Vincent van Gogh. His paintings and drawings*, Amsterdam 1970, the JH numbers to Jan Hulsker, *The new complete Van Gogh. Paintings, drawings, sketches*, Amsterdam & Philadelphia 1996.*

*Quotations from Van Gogh's letters are followed by two numbers set within square brackets. Where information from the letters is used in the text without quotation marks, the letter numbers will be found in a note. The first number refers to Han van Crimpen and Monique Berends (eds.), *De brieven van Vincent van Gogh*, 4 vols., The Hague 1990, and the second to *The complete letters of Vincent van Gogh*, 3 vols., Greenwich (Conn.) 1958. All quotations from the English edition have been checked by the translators and revised where necessary.*

*If it is known when Van Gogh sent a particular painting to Theo, the latter is listed in the provenance as the owner from that year. Where such information is not available he is regarded as the owner from 1885/86 (see 'Consignments'). Vincent Willem van Gogh, the son of Theo van Gogh and Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, was the formal owner of the Van Gogh Collection from 1891, but since his mother had custody of it until her death in 1925, her name precedes his in the provenance. A question mark within square brackets means that the information could not be verified.*

*Documents and literature listed in the exhibitions section provide information about the exhibition in question or are essential for identifying the work exhibited. In addition to the inventory numbers of documents (for which the data will be found at the back of the book), the following abbreviations have been used: BVGM (Van Gogh Museum loan form), IVGM (Van Gogh Museum inventory card) and BSM (loan form of the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam). New information on exhibition dates is not marked as such.*

*When identifying a painting in an exhibition from several available candidates, we have assumed that Johanna van Gogh-Bonger did not choose different works for successive exhibitions but adhered to her first choice. In some cases there is documentary evidence that a work other than the one listed in the exhibition catalogue was put on display; this is marked as '(incorrect info.)'. If known, the prices asked for the works at a commercial exhibition (or the words 'not for sale') follow the catalogue number. The sums (or 'not for sale') are set within square brackets when they are known from documents; the use of parentheses indicates that the information comes from the exhibition catalogue. If sales catalogues and documents with lists of the works exhibited do not specify the price, this is interpreted as meaning 'not for sale'.*

*The present owners of the works are listed in the provenance section. By far the majority of the paintings belong to the collection of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, while a small number are owned by the Van Gogh Museum. All the works reproduced in the comparative illustrations are from the collection of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, as are the documents in the Van Gogh Museum. The foundation's collection is on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum.*

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# Catalogue

Cornelia Peres and Marije Vellekoop supplied the technical data for the catalogue entries. Monique Hageman collated the literature and exhibitions information. Marije Vellekoop and Monique Hageman jointly researched the provenances. The catalogue entries were written by Louis van Tilborgh (*cats. 1-7, 10-20, 25-29, 38, 39, 40-42, 44*) and Marije Vellekoop (*cats. 8, 9, 21-24, 30-37, 43*).

# I Still life with cabbage and clogs

THE HAGUE,  
LATE NOVEMBER –  
MID-DECEMBER 1881

Oil on paper on panel  
34.0 x 55.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 137 V/1962  
F 1 JH 81

**TECHNICAL DATA**  
Paper on oak panel, edges probably trimmed, cradled. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Traces of under-drawing (IRR).  
Brush size: unknown.  
Varnished.

**PROVENANCE**  
November 1885–86 A.C. van Gogh-Carmentus, Nuenen/  
Breda; 1886–1902 Schrauwen,  
Breda [?]; 1902–03 W. van Bakel and C. Mouwen, Breda [?]; 1903–  
29 J. Willebeek le Mair,  
Rotterdam; 1929–? J. Willebeek le Mair, Rotterdam; 1939–62  
H.E. d'Audretsch, Amerongen;  
1962 bought by the Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962–73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

**LETTER**  
190/163.

**LITERATURE**  
Bremmer 1903, no. 27; De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 11, vol. 2, pl. 1; De la Faille 1939, p. 34, no. 2; De la Faille 1970, pp. 42,

This promising, but still rather formal still life is one of Van Gogh's first works in oil. It was painted sometime between the end of November and mid-December 1881, during his stay in The Hague, where he took art lessons from his cousin-by-marriage Anton Mauve (1838–1888).<sup>1</sup> During the summer, this famous landscape artist had advised Van Gogh to begin painting and had even agreed to 'coach' him [170/149]. An actual invitation to visit was not forthcoming, however, and at first Vincent – who was living with his parents in Etten – did not dare to bother him.<sup>2</sup> At the end of November he travelled to Amsterdam to declare his love to Kee Vos-Stricker (1846–1918) – another cousin. His attempt to win her ended in failure, and it was only then that he decided to remind Mauve of his kind offer. Van Gogh was unhappy in love, but perhaps success could be found elsewhere.

'Well, Mauve has set me up with a still life of an old pair of clogs & other objects,' he wrote to Theo upon arrival [189/162].



<sup>1</sup>a Sketch in a letter to Theo van Gogh of c. 18 December 1881 (190/163).  
Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.

He remained in The Hague for several weeks, and by around 18 December had executed a number of 'rough sketches,' two watercolours and five still lifes in oil, two of which he reproduced in a letter (fig. 1a).<sup>3</sup> 'Here are the subjects of two painted studies: one is a terracotta child's head with a fur cap, the other is a white cabbage with some potatoes etc.' [190/163]. The still life of the head has disappeared; the other is the work here under discussion.

It is unclear exactly how many paintings Van Gogh made during his stay with Mauve, but two further still lifes from the period are known. These pictures, both in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, are painted in the same detailed, conventional style, and we find the same rustic table as in the *Still life with cabbage and clogs* (fig. 1b and c). Of these three works, only *Still life with clogs* is painted on canvas; the other are on paper.<sup>4</sup>

The painting in the Van Gogh Museum depicts an arbitrary grouping of clogs, a blue cloth and winter vegetables – a few potatoes, a carrot, and a red and a white cabbage. The arrangement is rather offhand, and the work should be regarded not so much as an exercise in composition or perspective, but above all in colour and the reproduction of texture and materials. Van Gogh initially laid in the design in pencil; and traces of this underdrawing are still obvious in the cabbage. The paint has been brought on in a thin layer nearly everywhere and the scrumbling is particularly pronounced in the background, where the light and dark areas are barely distinguishable. He used an impasto only to indicate the ribs of the cabbage and the thin end of the carrot – with rather unsatisfactory results. As in *Still life with clogs* (fig. 1b), he used the brush handle to define the edges of the table. The primer is clearly visible; it has been applied with a roller and has a regular, grainy structure.

It is striking that Mauve allowed his apprentice to create an independent painting so soon after his arrival. Only in the twentieth century did it become standard practice for students to begin by painting still lifes; traditionally, they learned the techniques of oil painting by copying.<sup>5</sup> In light of his later attempt to force Van Gogh to draw after plaster casts in the academic manner, however it seems unlikely that Mauve's pedagogical methods were particularly progressive;<sup>6</sup> one suspects that he was simply trying to appease avid pupil's overwhelming desire to paint. Considering Van Gogh's lack of experience, a still life was the logical choice, as this genre was generally considered to be the easiest. Van Gogh thus learned

612; Arnold 1980, pp. 1190-94; Amsterdam 1987, p. 316, no. 156; Hulsker 1996, pp. 26, 28-29; Vienna 1996, p. 60; Arnold 1997, pp. 129-32.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1903 Rotterdam, no. 28 (later no. 11); 1957 Montreal, no. 19; 1960 Toronto, no. 17; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 1; 1968-69 London, no. 5; 1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 1; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 1; 1971-72 Paris, no. 1.

<sup>1</sup> The pictures painted under Mauve's direction in December 1881 are usually considered part of the Etten œuvre; to avoid confusion, this custom has been continued here.

<sup>2</sup> See letters 170/149, 172/R1, 173/151, 174/152, 175/R2, 177/153 and 187/161.

<sup>3</sup> For the number of still lifes see letter 190/163. Van Gogh did not live with Mauve but in a boarding house; see letter 189/162.

<sup>4</sup> F 63 JH 920 and F 62 JH 922; see the bibliography given in fn. 8 and 19. According to the catalogue raisonné, both pictures in the Kröller-Müller Museum are painted on canvas; this is, however, only the case with F 63 JH 920.

<sup>5</sup> Mauve, who seems never to have painted a still life himself, thus deviates from the methods used in his own training, which still encouraged copying; see E.P. Engel, Anton Mauve (1838-1888). Bronnenverkenning en analyse van zijn œuvre, Utrecht 1967, pp. 10-11. By the 1880's independent study of nature rather than mere copying of Old Masters was already recommended in the teaching of drawing by the 1880s; see Wolfgang Kemp, '...einen wahrhaft bildenden Zeichnenunterricht überall einzuführen': Zeichnen und Zeichnenunterricht der Laien 1500-1870, Frankfurt am Main 1979, pp. 283-323 and Adi Martis, Voor de Kunst en voor de Nijverheid (diss.), Utrecht 1990, pp. 117-29.

<sup>6</sup> See, among others, letter 218/189.

<sup>7</sup> See cat. 9. When, in November 1885,

*Van Gogh considered giving art lessons in Antwerp, he again thought of making his students begin by 'painting still lifes' [545/434]. How much he depended on Mauve's direction, has been expressed in his wish, at the end of 1884, to study with the Hague landscape painter once again; see letter 470/384.*

<sup>8</sup> Arnold 1980; reiterated in *idem*, 'Erstmalig und einmalig,' *Weltkunst* 54 (1984), no. 15, pp. 2009-11; *idem* 1995, pp. 239-44; and *idem* 1997, pp. 129-32, here in greater detail – as by this time Dorn, in Vienna 1996, p. 60, had already rejected the idea. The same was supposed to be true of the watercolours (Arnold 1995, p. 59), whereby the author carefully ignored Van Gogh's own comments on these works; see fn. 9.

<sup>9</sup> Van Gogh wrote that in the case of one of his watercolours (F 870 JH 84) Mauve had 'done some blotting' and repeatedly 'came round to point out things to me while I was working'; see letter 246/214. See also letter 190/163 and *Drawings* 1, no. 22, pp. 99-100.

<sup>10</sup> F 870 JH 84 was given to Dr G.A. Molenaar, who had treated Van Gogh for gonorrhoea (see letter 246/214); F 869 JH 83 went to Margot Begemann (1841-1907), while F 871 JH 85, the 'rough sketch,' ended up in Theo's collection and thus must have been given to him.

<sup>11</sup> This is clear from letter 191/164, in which he wrote to Theo: 'I've come away from him [Mauve] with some painted studies and a couple of watercolours.'

<sup>12</sup> See cat. 2. He must have sent for the pictures in January, once he had found a studio.

In December Mauve recommended he keep all his studies; letter 189/162.

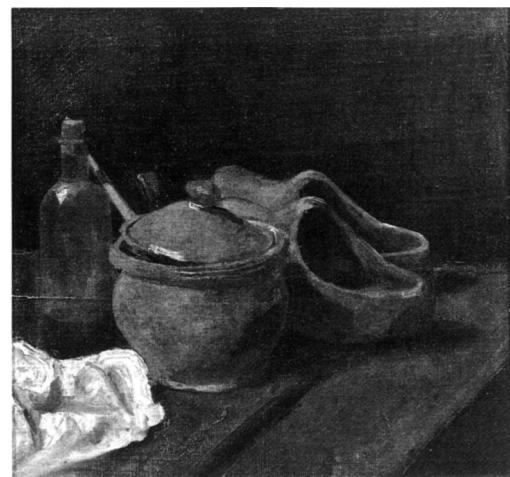
<sup>13</sup> In letter 418/349, from the end of 1883, Van Gogh writes that he went to The Hague 'to pack up and ship [my] studies, prints, etc., etc.'

<sup>14</sup> According to Stokvis 1926, pp. 3-8 and 27, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, 'Vincent van Gogh,' *Algemeen Handelsblad* (11 May 1911) and the introduction to the 1958 edition of the letters, p. XXXIX, the carpenter, a certain Schrauwen, sold the works to a dealer in second-hand goods in 1902. He in turn traded them to C. Mouwen and W. van Bakel of Breda, who put them up for sale at the Oldenzeel gallery. The provenance of the works exhibited is somewhat complicated by the fact that the new owners apparently also had Van Gogh pictures from another source; this appears from the correspondence of Johanna's

'practical things about colour & brushstroke,' and when he himself came to give lessons in Nuenen he remembered Mauve's teachings and strongly recommended that his amateur pupils to execute still lifes.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to his rough, impasto technique of only a year later (see cat. 2), the *Still life with cabbage and clogs* appears rather staid and conventional. This led Matthias Arnold to conclude that this painting, along with the still lifes in Otterlo, was actually finished by Mauve, Van Gogh being responsible only for the rough sketch.<sup>8</sup> This theory is, however, untenable, as it contravenes traditional practice in both the studio and the academy. Masters never completed their students' work; they usually did little more than correct details, if that.<sup>9</sup> There are also no traces of another hand, either in the still life itself or in the x-ray. Furthermore, the touch and paint application have nothing in common with Mauve's own style, and in comparison can only be described as awkward and unrefined.

We do not know precisely what Van Gogh himself thought of this particular picture. As he wrote, the paintings he made under Mauve's direction were 'hardly masterpieces,' although he added: 'still, there is something good and real in them, more than in anything else I've done up 'til now. And so I believe I am now at the beginning of the beginning of doing something serious' [191/164]. These statements, however, probably refer more to the watercolours



<sup>1b</sup> *Still life with clogs* (F 63 JH 920).  
1881. Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.



1 Still life with cabbage and clogs

lawyer, who did research into their exact legal status in 1904-05 (see inv. b 1560 V/1962).

It does seem that several of the works shown at Oldenzeel's had a different provenance, as indicated by a letter from H.P. Bremmer to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (inv. b 1557 V/1962), probably from 1903, in which he states that he is 'certain' some of the works on show belonged to 'an officer here in The Hague, who must be a member of Vincent's family. [...] Furthermore, I am sure that two of the paintings came from Tersteeg.' Herman G. Tersteeg was the manager of the Hague branch of Boussod, Valadon & Cie.

<sup>15</sup> The Oldenzeel label, once attached to the back of the painting, has survived. Considering that critics gave the picture various catalogue numbers, one may assume that the composition of the exhibition was not always the same.

In the *Algemeen Handelsblad* (5 January 1903), 'Oldenzeel. Vincent van Gogh,' it is listed under no. 28, while Jacobsen 1903, p. 115, refers to it as no. 11. According to an anonymous article, entitled 'Oldenzeel. Vincent. II,' *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (25 January 1903), the collection had just been rehung, which could explain the new numbering.

<sup>16</sup> In Bremmer 1903, vol. 4, no. 27, which reproduces the painting for the first time, the support is described as 'paper on panel.' On the subject of additional supports, see cat. 2. Several tears have appeared in the paper, due to warping (left and right of the centre). The panel was cradled only later; see note 20.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobsen 1903, p. 115 and *Algemeen Handelsblad*, cit. (note 15).

<sup>18</sup> This same Rotterdam gentleman later bought two more works, probably from the same gallery: F 1194 JH 588 and F 98 JH 901.

<sup>19</sup> Derkert 1946, p. 97, fn. 1, was the first to point out the connection between the three works, but his suggestions, hidden in the footnotes, were overlooked in 1970 by the revisers of De la Faille's catalogue raisonné. In 1980, Arnold (pp. 1190-94) – without mentioning Derkert – went in to great detail about the relationship between the pictures; his comments, too, have fallen by the wayside, as Jan Hulsker 1996 failed to take up his correction to De la Faille.

<sup>20</sup> No correspondence has survived relating to this acquisition, but, according to a separate note on the piece, it arrived at the Stedelijk Museum on 10 October 1962. It is not impossible that it was restored and cradled just after entering the

than the paintings. Unlike the still lifes, these were actually given away and are, moreover, signed.<sup>10</sup>

Following his sojourn in The Hague, Van Gogh took *Still life with cabbage and clogs*, along with his other studies, back to Etten.<sup>11</sup> He returned to The Hague shortly thereafter to make his home. The pictures certainly came with him, as he considered these pieces indispensable in his effort to master the craft of painting.<sup>12</sup> When he departed for Drenthe in September 1883 he left them behind in The Hague, but when he moved back to his parents' house at the beginning of December they were returned to him once again.<sup>13</sup> By the time he went to Antwerp around two years later the studies had lost some of their instructive value, and they thus remained with his mother – along with the works actually painted in Nuenen. When she moved to Breda in 1886 the paintings and drawings went too; the majority was stored in the house of a carpenter. They were eventually forgotten, came into the hands of others, and resurfaced only in 1903, when the Kunstzalen Oldenzeel in Rotterdam organised a number of sale exhibitions.<sup>14</sup>

*Still life with cabbage and clogs* was included in the first of these shows.<sup>15</sup> The panel was probably attached shortly before, as was the case with the majority of the works exhibited.<sup>16</sup> The painting is mentioned only briefly in the criticism. After noting Van Gogh's rather still unassured painting technique, Jacobsen nonetheless spoke of a 'wonderfully executed *Still life*,' while the critic for the



<sup>10</sup> *Still life with straw hat* (F 62 JH 922), 1881. Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.

*Algemeen Handelsblad* called it ‘strong, sober and rich in true feeling.’<sup>17</sup> Although the exhibition attracted considerable attention, it was not a financial success. Only a few works were sold, among them this one, which was purchased by the Rotterdam commercial agent Jacob Willebeek le Mair (1851–1929).<sup>18</sup>

Van Gogh’s correspondence was published in 1914. Thanks to the letter sketch mentioned above, the picture could now be identified as one of the artist’s earliest efforts in oil painting. Baart de la Faille listed it in his 1928 catalogue raisonné as number one. He did not, however, make a connection to the other two – undocumented – still lifes, mistakenly believing they were painted in Nuenen.<sup>19</sup>

The painting was bought by the Vincent van Gogh Foundation in 1962 for exhibition in the newly founded, but still unbuilt, Van Gogh Museum.<sup>20</sup> Established in 1960, it was the foundations first purchase. The collection thus came to include not only an example of Van Gogh’s early work but also his ‘first painting,’ as Vincent Willem van Gogh (1890–1978), the foundation’s chairman, wrote.<sup>21</sup> He took De la Faille’s numbering literally, but it seems unlikely that *Still life with cabbage and clogs* was actually Van Gogh’s very first painting. That picture – as we know from the letter to Theo cited above [189/162] – was of an ‘old pair of clogs & other objects.’ This describes the painting in the Kröller-Müller Museum (fig. 1b) more closely than the one in Amsterdam. Indeed, it, too, includes clogs, but it is the winter vegetables that play the most important role. Van Gogh thus characterised it as a picture of ‘a white cabbage with a few potatoes etc.’ [190/163].<sup>22</sup>

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museum. A stamp on the back bears the name of the restorer Angenitus Martinus de Wild (1899–1969), who advised the Stedelijk Museum from 1933–68 and even carried out conservation treatments.

<sup>21</sup> Quoted from the diary of Vincent Willem van Gogh, 16 April 1972 (inv. b 5087 V/1993).

<sup>22</sup> It is also possible, of course, that the painting described in the letter has been lost.

## 2 View of the sea at Scheveningen

SCHEVENINGEN,  
21 OR 22 AUGUST 1882

Oil on canvas  
34.5 × 51.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 416 M/1990  
F 4 JH 187

TECHNICAL DATA  
Originally on paper, edges cropped, wax resin lining.  
Ground of the paper unknown, commercially primed, thin.  
Brush size: varying from very narrow to very wide; paint applied directly from tube.  
Unvarnished. Details: pinholes, weave imprints.

PROVENANCE  
November 1885-86 A.C. van Gogh-Carbentus, Nuenen/Breda;  
1886-1902 Schrauwen, Breda [?];  
1902 J.C. Couvreur, Breda [?];  
1902-03 W. van Bakel and C. Mouwen, Breda [?]; 1903-30 G. Ribbius Peletier, Utrecht, bought from Kunstzalen Oldenzeel, for f 2,500; 1930-39 A.L. Ribbius Peletier-Wijbelingh, Utrecht; 1939-89 A.E. Ribbius Peletier, Amsterdam/Scheveningen; 1949-90 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1990 bequeathed to the Dutch State for placement in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LETTER  
259/226.

Around 20 of the 70 or more painted studies Van Gogh executed during his sojourn in The Hague have been preserved.<sup>1</sup> Only one of these is now in the Van Gogh Museum: this view of the stormy sea at Scheveningen, a fishing village near The Hague. The picture can be dated to the end of August 1882 and was painted during a spell of bad weather. Van Gogh had ventured out expressly to depict the 'angry storm': 'There's been a lot of wind and rain this last week,' he wrote to Theo on the evening of Saturday, 26 August,<sup>2</sup> 'I've gone out to Scheveningen[en] several times to have a look at it. And brought back two little seascapes. There's quite a bit of sand in one already; as for the other, I had to scrape it off completely twice because of the amount of sand that had gotten into it – it was really storming and the sea had almost reached the dunes. The wind was blowing so hard I could barely stand or even see through the whirling sand. Still, after I had scraped it off, I tried to paint the scene again straight away, in a little inn behind the dunes, then going out to take another look. So at least I have a few souvenirs of it' [259/226].

Weather reports indicate that this storm system swept over the Netherlands from 20-24 August 1882.<sup>3</sup> The pictures Van Gogh describes appear to have been executed on two separate occasions: one on the 21st, when the wind was blowing at force 8 but there was no rain; and the other on the 22nd, the day of the actual storm, with winds gusting at force 9-10. According to Van Gogh, the sea actually seemed much calmer on the second day: 'During the storm itself one saw fewer waves, and the effect was less of furrows in a ploughed up field' [259/226].

It is difficult to say which of the two paintings is the one now in the Van Gogh Museum.<sup>4</sup> In light of the description, however, the first work seems more likely than the second.<sup>5</sup> The water has not yet encroached upon the dunes, while the high, rushing waves strongly resemble the 'furrows of a ploughed up field' [259/226]. Another indication is that the entire surface layer contains sand, clearly visible in the x-ray (fig. 2a).



2 View of the sea at Scheveningen

## LITERATURE

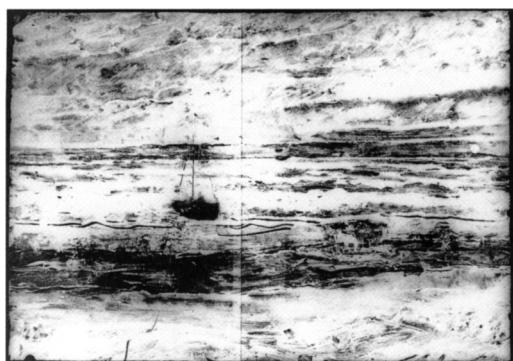
Bremmer 1903, no. 31;  
 De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, pp. 12-13, vol. 2, pl. 11; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 111, 155, 413;  
 De la Faille 1939, p. 38, no. 8;  
 Van Dantzig 1952, pp. 15, 57-62;  
 De la Faille 1970, pp. 44, 612;  
 Visser 1973, pp. 97-101; Paris, London & The Hague 1983, p. 301, no. 148; Amsterdam 1991 I, pp. 38-39, 70; Catalogue 1995, p. 184; Hulsker 1996, p. 51; Van Tilborgh/Vellekoop 1997-98, pp. 30-34, 36, no. 3.

## EXHIBITIONS

1903 Rotterdam, no. 18 (later no. 17); 1904 Groningen, no catalogue; 1904 Rotterdam, no. 1; 1905 Amsterdam, no. 1a; 1913 The Hague, no. 2; 1924 Utrecht, no. 18; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 14; 1932 Amsterdam, no. 1; 1953 The Hague, no. 12; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 6; 1954 Zürich, no. 1; 1954-55 Bern, no. 1; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 22; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 2; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 1; 1956 Leeuwarden, no. 1; 1956 Recklinghausen, no. 89; 1956 Munich, no. 40; 1957 Recklinghausen, no. 58; 1957 Essen,

Van Gogh was trying to master the traditional genre of seascape at just this time, and the example of the popular Hague School painter Hendrik Willem Mesdag (1831-1915) probably played an important role.<sup>6</sup> Van Gogh painted his picture at the spot where the fishing boats were usually moored in a row. However, only a single boat is depicted here: a one-master with its bow turned towards the beach.<sup>7</sup> The boat is not tied with the customary three lines but only one, indicating that it is merely a small shrimper (see fig. 2b).<sup>8</sup> The beach is dotted with figures, come to admire the stormy sea. The man in the cart, pulled by white and black horses, seems to have another purpose, although this remains mysterious.

This briskly executed work has an undeniable charm. After at least a year of doing nothing but drawing, Van Gogh had begun to paint again in August 1882. This seascape was probably the eleventh work undertaken since the beginning of the month.<sup>9</sup> The painter himself was surprised at the highly personal nature of these 'first things' [258/225], and the pictures do indeed exhibit a more individual style than the still lifes painted under Mauve's direction at the end of the previous year (see cat. 1). In 1906, the German critic Julius Meier-Graefe called *View of the sea at Scheveningen* a 'thick, clumsy painting'; however, although the touch is crude and the simply-drawn figures somewhat haphazardly distributed over the beach, the space and approaching storm are forcefully characterised.<sup>10</sup> The rolling, wild waves and wind-blown clouds are particularly well captured. The foamy sea is



2a X-ray of cat. 2.



2b Shrimpers on the beach, postcard, c. 1902. Scheveningen, Museum Scheveningen.

effectively suggested with paint applied directly from the tube and gently modelled with the brush.<sup>11</sup> The decision to paint the seagull over the water in black, and the one in the grey sky its real colour was an intelligent one. Examination in raking light reveals that the paint layer is thick and laboured (fig. 2c). An excessive use of binder has led to wrinkling in several places. The black in the paint grooves, particularly noticeable in the foreground, is somewhat curious. Van Dantzig interpreted it as a glaze, but this would certainly have been inappropriate, considering Van Gogh's otherwise expressly *alla prima* technique.<sup>12</sup> Closer study revealed that it is nothing more than a layer of unyielding dirt.

We do not know if the artist considered this painting as anything other than the simple souvenir of a memorable storm. In any case, his studies were certainly not intended to leave the studio. Although he contemplated sending one of the seascapes to his brother at the end of September, he felt his recent works were simply too crucial to his renewed effort to master the craft of painting to part with.<sup>13</sup> A year later, however, he was increasingly displeased with these early pictures, writing that he 'liked them less the more' he saw them; he even went so far as to call them 'bad and wrong' in a moment of desperate self-criticism [300/365, 355/293]. Nonetheless, Van Gogh took them with him when he left The Hague for Nuenen.<sup>14</sup> When he departed for Antwerp in 1885, however, he abandoned them, along with a number of other works. He later characterised these 'old studies and drawings' as 'no good in themselves'<sup>[865/629a]</sup>, and one can thus perhaps forgive his mother for forgetting about them at the end of her son's life.<sup>15</sup>

*View of the sea at Scheveningen* reappeared in 1903, when it was put up for sale, along with the other pictures left behind in Nuenen, at the Oldenzeel gallery in Rotterdam.<sup>16</sup> Critics considered it one of high points of the exhibition. 'What a lot of movement there is in it!' wrote Jacobsen in *Onze kunst*. 'The large waves roll out from the horizon, unstoppable, one after the other, their rumbling voices echoing in space. How free and expansive it all seems, with a brisk wind blowing through!'<sup>17</sup> Another critic believed it even overshadowed 'the far more capable Mesdag,' while the painter Floris Verster (1861-1927) later claimed it was 'the most beautiful Van Gogh' he knew.<sup>18</sup>

Johanna van Gogh-Bonger included *View of the sea* in the 1905 retrospective held at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which

no. 145; 1958 Paris, no. 38;  
1960 Paris, no. 1; 1960  
Amsterdam, no. 11; 1962  
Warsaw, ex catalogue; 1962-63  
Tel Aviv & Haifa, no. 15; 1975  
Zeist, no. 39; 1983 Paris,  
London & The Hague, no. 148;  
1996 Vienna, no. 19; 1998-99  
Washington & Los Angeles, no. 1.

<sup>1</sup> The number 70 is mentioned in letter 394/329.

<sup>2</sup> This letter was traditionally (see Hulsker 1993, p. 30) dated to 19 August; based on the content, however, Roland Dorn has now placed it after letter 260/227, which was probably written around 20 August (Vienna 1996, p. 96, fn. 1). Dorn has suggested 26 August as a possibility.

<sup>3</sup> Information from the Klimatologische dienstverlening, De Bilt.

<sup>4</sup> The other painting described by Van Gogh has disappeared. Of the three surviving seascapes from the Hague (F 2 JH 173, F 3 JH 186 and cat. 2), *View of the sea at Scheveningen* is the only one that shows the scene in bad weather, although it is, admittedly, difficult to determine the exact climate conditions in F 3 JH 186.

<sup>5</sup> Scholars have generally avoided choosing between the two works – as in Paris, London & The Hague 1983. Only Dorn, in Vienna 1996, p. 98, unequivocally identifies the painting with the second work described, although without giving any arguments in its favour.

<sup>6</sup> On Van Gogh's admiration for Mesdag see letters 165/144, 170/149 and 257/R11.

<sup>7</sup> On traditional mooring practice see Visser 1973, p. 98. The boat depicted maybe 'the last in the row' [259/226], as was the 'little pink' in the second – lost – painting. It is certainly possible that Van Gogh painted the same location twice.

<sup>8</sup> On this type of boat, called a bomschuit, see E.W. Petrus, Oude zeilschepen en hun modellen. Binnenschepen, jachten en vissersschepen, Bussum 1971, pp. 207-15, esp. p. 215. The boat was identified by Gabriel Groenewoud, Museum Scheveningen. On the number of anchor lines see Visser 1973, p. 98.

<sup>9</sup> Following his first exercises in oil painting under Mauve the previous year, Van Gogh painted only at the very beginning of 1882

(see letter 255/223). The number 11 is based on descriptions in the letters.

<sup>10</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, 'Über Vincent van Gogh,' *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 1 (February 1906), p. 146 (repeated in *idem*, *Vincent van Gogh*, Munich 1910, p. 11). The coarseness of execution is probably at least partially due to Van Gogh's use of 'Lyon's brushes,' about which he wrote 'although they are fine they create broad strokes and dots' (letter 259/226). These brushes were made of hog's hair and were relatively new on the market, introduced to 'replace the more expensive sable's hair brushes,' as Willem E. Roelofs Jr noted in *De praktijk van het schilderen. Wenken aan collega's door een kunstschilder*, The Hague, n.d. [1919], p. 41. They were probably not part of Mauve's gift (see letter 192/165), but rather bought by Van Gogh himself in August (see letters 254/222 and 258/225).

<sup>11</sup> We find evidence of paint applied directly from the tube in other pictures of the Hague period, among them *Girl in a wood*, now in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo (F 8 JH 182). Van Gogh describes this method of working in letter 261/228.

<sup>12</sup> Van Dantzig 1952, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Letter 270/234. He even asked Theo to return works he had already sent him (see letters 273/238 and 281/241).

<sup>14</sup> See cat. 1, fn. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Van Gogh's mother was later criticised for her lack of interest in Vincent's early work, but she always denied that the family 'may not have paid enough attention to the things we found from Nuenen'; see her letter to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger from c. 1903 (inv. b 1113 V/1962).

<sup>16</sup> For the complete history of the pictures shown at Oldenzeel see cat. 1.

<sup>17</sup> Jacobsen 1903, p. 116. This article lists the work as no. 18, while the author of 'Oldenzeel. Vincent.' *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (25 January 1903) gives it as no. 17; see cat. 1, fn. 15.

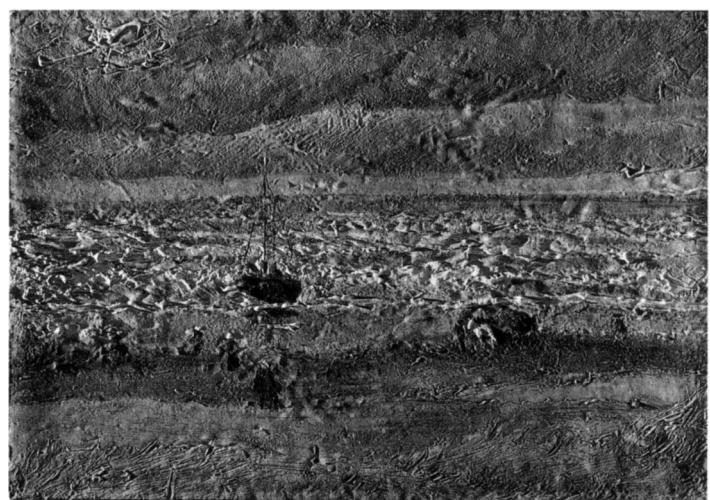
<sup>18</sup> *De Kroniek* 9 (3 January 1903), pp. 19-20. Verster's statement is quoted from a postcard he sent to Gerlach Ribbius Peletier; see *Van Tilborgh/Vellekoop* 1997-98, p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> The other two works were *Beach and sea* (F 2 JH 173), dated 1882, and *Stuffed green parrot* (F 14 JH 1193), which was apparently then believed to belong to this period. These three paintings, together with F 43 JH 516, F 184

comprised only three works from Van Gogh's Hague period.<sup>19</sup> 'One is surprised by this sudden mastery in the expression of air and space,' wrote Johanna's second husband, Johan Cohen Gosschalk (1873-1912), on the occasion.<sup>20</sup> The critic Albert Plasschaert (1874-1941) was also full of praise: 'One might like to have seen the sky painted a little differently, but the mass of waves, the thickly painted foam and the delicate grey reflection of the sky where the water has receded, leaving only a film on the sand, made – and make – this work something special.'<sup>21</sup>

By this time the painting already belonged to Gerlach Ribbius Peletier (1856-1930), an Utrecht gentleman and follower of H.P. Bremmer's (1871-1956) art courses.<sup>22</sup> A man of independent means, Ribbius Peletier had begun collecting art in 1902. Undoubtedly encouraged by his enormous wealth, and probably counting on his newcomer's lack of knowledge about the art market, Oldenzeel had originally offered it to him for the outrageous price of f 5,000. The collector found this 'out of all proportion,' suggesting instead f 750. The lower price was justified, he felt, by the fact that the canvas was not signed, which – as he wrote – 'is certainly detrimental to its commercial value, as you yourself must admit.'<sup>23</sup> The gallery made a counter-offer of f 3,500, Ribbius Peletier then went up to f 2,500; obviously, no further negotiations were necessary – the price was an absolute record.<sup>24</sup>

Gerlach Ribbius Peletier died in 1930 and his wife in 1939. The collection – which included a total of ten Van Goghs – was



<sup>2c</sup> Raking light photograph of cat. 2.

divided among their five children.<sup>25</sup> Elisabeth (1891–1989), a passionate social-democrat and feminist, inherited three, among them a landscape from Saint-Rémy and this seascape, which she had specifically requested.<sup>26</sup> In 1972 she considered donating these works to the State, to be housed after her death in the newly-built, but not yet opened, Van Gogh Museum, as well as other institutions. Vincent Willem van Gogh, the museum's founder, was allowed to make his choice; he favoured *View of the sea* 'because we have no early paintings (except for the first still life).'<sup>27</sup> Shortly thereafter he changed his mind, opting instead for the picture from Saint-Rémy.<sup>28</sup> However, when Elisabeth died in 1989 it appeared both works had been bequeathed to the Van Gogh Museum.

Over the course of time, *View of the sea* has undergone various radical treatments, which have considerably changed its appearance; the surface now has many bumps, dents, fills and retouches. Today the support is canvas, but it was originally paper.<sup>29</sup> Before painting, it was fastened to a frame, as we know from a letter to Theo from the beginning of August 1882. Here Van Gogh reports on his first oil sketches: 'These studies are of medium size, slightly bigger than the lid of regular paintbox; I don't work resting on the lid, but have rather attached the paper [...] with pins to a frame covered in canvas, which is easy to carry' [256/224].<sup>30</sup> We find none of these original pinholes in *View of the sea*, as the picture was later cropped. At the top, however, there are three impressions (and holes) from other pins. These indicate that Van Gogh tacked the painting up later again, before it was completely dry, perhaps in



2d Detail of cat.2

JH 458 and F 384 JH 1425, were among the works recommended by H.P. Bremmer from the Oldenzeel exhibitions in 1903 and 1904. He described them as 'the best of what I remember from the last shows in Rotterdam'; undated letter to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger (inv. b 1969 V/1962).

<sup>20</sup> Johan Cohen Gosschalk, 'Vincent van Gogh,' Elsevier's Geillustreerd Maandschrift 5 (October 1905), p. 226.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Plasschaert, 'Vincent van Gogh,' Kritiek van beeldende kunsten en kunstnijverheid 2 (1905), p. 109. W. Steenhoff ('Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh in het Stedelijk-Museum 111,' De Amsterdamer [13 August 1905]) was slightly more critical, referring to the sky as as 'a little ponderous; it presses down on the lower plane as a thick layer of paint,' but found this relatively unimportant in comparison to the artist's 'excellent rendering of the beach environment.'

<sup>22</sup> On G. Ribbius Peletier, see Wessel Reinink (ed.), Landgoed Linschoten, Bussum 1994, pp. 178–84 and 191–211; for his collection see Van Tilborgh/Vellekoop 1997–98, pp. 27–41.

<sup>23</sup> Van Tilborgh/Vellekoop 1997–98, p. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. The painting's value barely rose in the decade that followed. In 1940 it was estimated at f3,000, while other Van Gogh paintings in the collection would have brought more than double their purchase price (see *ibid.*, cat. 4).

<sup>25</sup> The other works are F 7 JH 178; F 42 JH 517; F 43 JH 516; F 46 JH 524; F 95 JH 827; F 121 JH 956; F 144 JH 561; F 673 JH 1919; and F 723 JH 1722.

<sup>26</sup> Van Tilborgh/Vellekoop 1997–98, p. 34. Her other two Van Goghs were F 723 JH 1722 and F 46 JH 524. On Elisabeth Ribbius Peletier, see also Hans Goedkoop and Jhim Lamoree, 'Een dame en haar vrouwen,'

De Haagse Post (7 April 1990), pp. 49–53.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted from the diary of V.W. van Gogh, 16 April 1972 (inv. b 5087 V/1993).

<sup>28</sup> The Saint-Rémy painting is *View of the Alpilles* (F 723 JH 1722); see also the letter from V.W. van Gogh to Mr E. Ribbius Peletier, dated 17 April 1972. In 1967, V.W. van Gogh had asked the Ribbius Peletier family if they would be willing to lend their pictures to the museum, thinking particularly of the *View of the sea* at Scheveningen (V.W. van Gogh to D. van Wely-Ribbius Peletier, 9 June 1967). In her 1986 testament, Elisabeth left the third work

- Gennep watermill (F 46 JH 524) – to the State, but gave no specific destination. It is now on permanent loan to the Noord-Brabants Museum in Den Bosch.

29 There are still remains of paper in the paint; see the two restoration reports on the picture by Karoline Beltinger, Stichting Kollektief Restauratie Atelier, Amsterdam, summer 1991 and 10 December 1992.

30 In both the De la Faille edition of 1970 and Hulsker 1996 we find the supports for a number of works from this period described as canvas. This is sometimes correct, but one cannot simply take it as a given, as Van Gogh indicates in his letter.

31 M.J. Brusse, 'Vijftig jaar Rotterdamsche Kunsthandel. Het jubileum B.H.A. Unger,' Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant (22 September 1933). It was H.P. Bremmer, in *idem* 1903, no. 31, who first mentioned that the picture was on paper on panel; this publication also includes the first reproduction of the work.

32 Quoted in Van Tilborgh/Vellekoop 1997-98, p. 31. The other picture is F 144 JH 561.

33 See Beltinger, *op. cit.* (note 29).

34 The descriptions of the work in the œuvre catalogues offers little assistance, as the authors appear to have merely copied from one another. In 1937, the otherwise trustworthy Vanbeselaere continued to describe it as paper on panel (p. 111), while De la Faille 1939 was the first to refer to it as 'canvas,' adding, however, 'on cardboard.'

order to study the final result or to add the finishing touches, among them the little red-brown flag.

The painting was first treated shortly before the sale exhibition at Oldenzeel's in 1903. According to the memoirs of the dealer B.H.A. Unger (died 1945), then the youngest member of the gallery's staff, the owners of the collection – which had once belonged to Van Gogh's mother – had had their pictures 'mounted on solid oak panels.'<sup>31</sup> Ribbius Peletier complained about this operation, which had also been carried out on the Van Gogh portrait of a peasant woman he bought at the same time: 'What a pity that the wood [...] is apparently so young. The pieces are warping badly and it would be good to find a way of dealing with this problem.'<sup>32</sup>

This was probably what led to the removal of the panel and the transferral of the entire paint layer to canvas, a process which almost entirely eliminated the original paper.<sup>33</sup> Traces of this support can still be found here and there, for example in the thinly painted hull of the boat (fig. 2d). It is not known when exactly this occurred.<sup>34</sup> We know only that the panel was removed by Angenitus Martinus de Wild (1899-1969), whose name is stamped on the stretcher. De Wild was a restorer who occasionally worked for the Stedelijk Museum, and it is therefore possible that the picture was treated shortly after it entered the museum as a loan in 1949.

### 3 Cottages

During his entire artistic career, Van Gogh had an unconditional love for peasant dwellings. ‘What I admire most in architecture is a cottage with a mossy thatched roof and a black chimney,’ he wrote in 1889 [811/B20]. Like the painters of the Barbizon School, he was always in search of the country life, unspoiled by industry and progress, and his affection for huts and small, picturesque cottages developed out of this quest. For example, fearing it was losing its old character, he wrote of his native Brabant in 1882: ‘For myself, I can’t help being a little saddened by the sight of a new pub with a red tile roof [...] where I remember a mud hut covered with a mossy thatch’ [257/R11].

His desire for a ‘primitive’ life and unblemished nature moved Van Gogh to travel to Drenthe in mid-September 1883. He was particularly attracted to the immense moorlands, but later came to appreciate the peat-cutting regions in the southeast of the province as well.<sup>1</sup> His first stop was Hoogeveen. At the beginning of October he moved on to Nieuw-Amsterdam, where he remained until December. He then left Drenthe and moved to his parents’ home in Nuenen.

His first Drenthe painting depicted a ‘hut [on the moor], made of nothing but sods and sticks’ [389/324]. This picture, executed in Hoogeveen and now lost, was followed by a number of other studies of similar motifs, two of which have been preserved: the work here under discussion and *Farm with stacks of peat* (cat. 5).<sup>2</sup>

These houses belong to peat-cutters. They were designed as temporary dwellings, but continued to be used even after the peat reserves had been exhausted.<sup>3</sup> They are not of the most rudimentary type: having both stone chimneys and finished façades – made of wood on the right and probably stone (below) and turf (above) on the left.<sup>4</sup> In the foreground lies a small plot, probably for the workers’ own use. To the far right are two large, hump-like masses, whose function is unclear;<sup>5</sup> the one to the left was probably meant to indicate another hut in the distance. The rectangular shape next to the largest house cannot be identified.

NIEUW-AMSTERDAM,  
MID-SEPTEMBER –  
MID-NOVEMBER 1883

Oil on canvas  
55.5 × 35.5 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 53 V/1962  
F 17 JH 395

TECHNICAL DATA  
Canvas, 20 × 17 (thin) threads,  
medium weave, edges cropped,  
wax resin lining. Formerly  
canvas on cardboard(?). Ground  
impossible to determine. Brush  
size: narrow and medium.  
Varnished.

PROVENANCE  
September/November 1883-91  
T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van  
Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van  
Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh  
Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to  
the Stedelijk Museum, Amster-  
dam; 1973 on permanent loan to  
the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

LITERATURE  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 16,  
vol. 2, pl.v; Vanbeselaere 1937,  
pp. 238, 414; De la Faille 1939,  
p. 48, no. 25; Tralbaut 1959,  
pp. 56-57, 210, no. 7, p. 223;  
De la Faille 1970, pp. 48-49,  
612; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 120-  
21, 316, no. 1.57; Hulsker 1996,  
pp. 93-94, 101.

EXHIBITIONS  
1905 Amsterdam, no. 2  
[Dfl.500]; 1947 Groningen,

no. 2; 1948-49 The Hague,  
no. 2; 1953 Assen, no. 29; 1955  
Antwerp 1, no. 40; 1955  
Amsterdam, no. 13; 1956  
Leeuwarden, no. 3; 1961 Annen,  
no. 10; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 2;  
1967 Hoogeveen, no. 9;  
1968-69 London, no. 18;  
1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 95;  
1983 Paris, London &  
The Hague, no. 155; 1988 Rome,  
no. 1; 1996 Vienna, no. 51;  
1998-99 Washington & Los  
Angeles, no. 2.

<sup>1</sup> See letters 257/R11 and 381/316, and Mariëtte den Bieman-Smithuis, 'Het land is hier zeer ernstig van stemming,' in Assen 1997, pp. 91-95.

<sup>2</sup> See letters 389/324, 395/330 and 399/335.

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to Michiel A.W. Gerding, Assen, local historian of Drenthe, who identified the types of houses depicted.

<sup>4</sup> The simplest dwellings were constructed of stacked pieces of turf, attached to a skeleton of young tree trunks, with a hole in the centre of the roof to allow the smoke to escape; see Michiel A.W. Gerding, 'De mythe van de veenarbeid,' in Boudien de Vries et al., De kracht der zwakken: Studies over arbeid en arbeidersbeweging in het verleden. Opstellen aangeboden aan Theo van Tijn, Amsterdam 1992, pp. 320-25.

<sup>5</sup> They may have been for use in building a stall; they are certainly not stacks of commercially-cut turf. See also cat. 5, fn. 4.

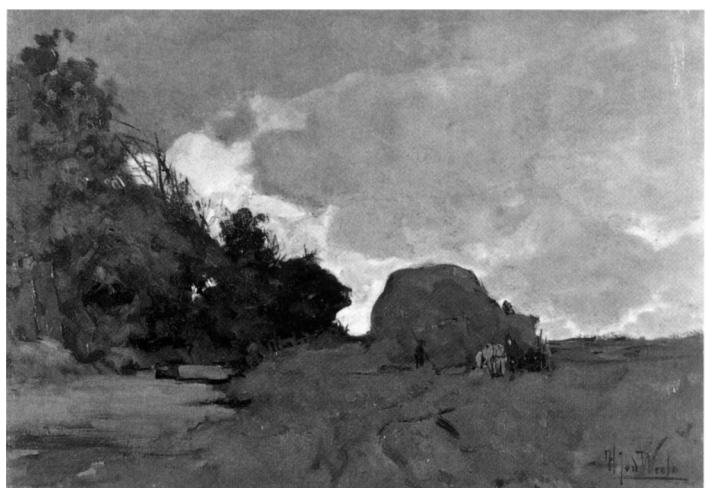
<sup>6</sup> Both De la Faille 1970 and Hulsker 1973, p. 78 and 1993, p. 36 cite this quotation, assuming that the work described is either cat. 3 or 5. Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 238 and Tralbaut 1959, p. 210 both believed Cottages was not mentioned in the letters. Without any supporting evidence Tralbaut claimed that the picture was 'one of the first painted studies from Drenthe' (p. 56).

<sup>7</sup> The first batch of work, included 'three small studies' [392/327]; the second contained 'six studies' [408/341]. (Dijk 1996, p. 107, erroneously dates this letter to 4 November. It was part of Vincent's campaign to convince his brother to become a painter, and thus comes

This painting has usually been included among the 'several studies' Van Gogh made in Hoogeveen at the beginning of October, shortly before leaving for Nieuw-Amsterdam [395/330]. It is thought to be the picture he refers to as a 'large farmhouse with a moss roof,' but given the fact that the building in the foreground is not particularly monumental [395/330] this cannot be the case.<sup>6</sup>

We do not know exactly when *Cottages* was painted. Van Gogh shipped works to his brother from Drenthe twice: around 23 September and again around the middle of November. Assuming that the painting was among those sent, it must have been executed before the latter.<sup>7</sup> The image itself offers no precise clues; the dwellings depicted could be found in both Hoogeveen or Nieuw-Amsterdam. Nor does the style give us anything to go by. In terms of both brushwork and colour it seems somewhat less self-assured than *Farm with stacks of peat* (cat. 5), painted in mid-November, but whether this should lead us to date it much earlier is questionable. Van Gogh stayed in Drenthe for only two and half months, and only a small number works – six – have survived, making it virtually impossible to trace any recognisable stylistic development.<sup>8</sup>

Van Gogh often referred to the Barbizon School when characterising his motifs in Drenthe, and he mentions Jules Dupré's *Evening* (fig. 3b) – in the collection of the Hague marine painter



<sup>3a</sup> Herman van der Weele, *Stormy landscape*. The Hague, Haags Gemeentemuseum.



3 Cottages

directly before letter 409/342, which was written at the end of the month). On 13 February 1884, now in Nuenen, he sent him 'three panels' [431/356], – given the fact that he felt no need to send Theo his 'studies from here [i.e. Nuenen]' [434/358] – must also have been painted in Drenthe. It is not known which pictures these were. None of the surviving works (see fn. 8) is painted on panel. According to the œuvre catalogues, F 20 JH 417 is on panel, but this is a misunderstanding: the picture is actually canvas on panel (see New York [Christie's], 12 May 1987, lot 22).

8 In addition to the works included here (cats. 4 and 5), these are F 188 JH 413, F 21 JH 415 and F 20 JH 417. F 18 JH 397 has traditionally been included in the Drenthe œuvre, but according to Dorn, in Vienna 1996, p. 154, it was painted in The Hague; it may be the work described in letter 384/319 ('farmhouse after a rainstorm').

Pictures are mentioned in letters 389/324 (1); 390/325 (2); 391/326 (at least 2); 395/330 (at least 2); 396/331 (1); 399/335 (2); 404/339 (2); and 409/342 (2); the 'study of a red sun between birch trees in a swampy meadow' cited in letter 390/325 is probably part of the group referred to as 'studies of the moors' in letter 391/326.

9 See letter 389/324 and Fred Leeman and Hanna Pennock, Museum Mesdag: catalogue of paintings and drawings, Amsterdam & Zwolle 1996, p. 190, no. 126; Van Gogh had seen the painting in an exhibition in The Hague in 1882.

10 Van Gogh had actually discussed the trip with Van der Weele, reporting to Theo: 'he came to the studio one afternoon and looked at my studies one by one; we worked on some of these together, so that he could give me pointers in technique' [383/318]. The comparison was first made by Dorn, in Vienna 1996, p. 307.

11 Letter 397/332, dated c. 12 October, has two parts, mistakenly combined at some time in the past. The quotation comes from the second part, which must have been written at the beginning of Van Gogh's stay in Nieuw-Amsterdam (early October). In this part of the letter, namely, the artist mentions a 'very curious drawbridge' which he can see from his rented room.

The missive may be a postscript to letter 395/330.

12 Van Gogh used a similar imprimatura for his woodland pictures in the Paris period; see Claas Hulshoff and Sjraar van Heugten, 'Restauratie van een bosgezicht van Vincent van Gogh,'

Hendrik Willem Mesdag – in connection with this first study of a hut, mentioned above.<sup>9</sup> The model for *Cottages*, however, should be sought elsewhere. Particularly striking is the flatness of the execution which, together with the limited palette, seems to point to the influence of the Hague painter Herman van der Weele (1852–1930). Van Gogh had learned 'some useful things' from him shortly before leaving for Drenthe (fig. 3a).<sup>10</sup>

The picture was begun on the spot, as demonstrated by the large amount of sand in the paint. The thick, laboured surface makes the actual build up difficult to follow; in any case, it seems that the foreground and buildings were painted before the sky. As in the museum's other two works from this period (cats. 4 and 5), Van Gogh sought here to achieve the right balance between the dark foreground and lighter sky. He knew that one should not 'see local colour in itself but in the context of the colour of the sky [...]' 'The sky is grey' he wrote, 'and nevertheless so luminous that not even pure white can reproduce its light and brilliance. If, however, one paints the sky grey anyway – remaining behind the real power of nature – then – to be consistent – one has to make the browns and yellow-greys of the landscape several shades darker as well' [397/332].<sup>11</sup>

It is interesting to note that a reddish brown underpaint was applied over the primer.<sup>12</sup> Van Gogh may have borrowed this idea from older art, but here the underlying colour plays no actual role in the final image. It was probably added merely to help the artist achieve the desired harmony between the dark foreground and the light sky. He could thus build up the image



<sup>3b</sup> Jules Dupré, *Evening*, c. 1875–1880  
Den Haag, Museum Mesdag

immediately, beginning with the middle tones, and avoided becoming confused by the white ground.

As far as we know, Van Gogh used this type of canvas only in Drenthe. It may have been purchased from the Hague colourman Wilhelmus Johannes Leurs (1828-1895) or from the chemist Jan Furnée (1833-1894), with whom Van Gogh corresponded at the end of September.<sup>13</sup> At the beginning of the century the work apparently had another support, but whether this was cardboard – as in *Farm with stacks of peat* (cat. 5) – is unknown.<sup>14</sup> In any case, there are no ageing cracks, indicating that it was never attached to a frame. The unknown support was removed at some point and the picture relined. This was probably the work of the restorer J.C. Traas (1898-1984), who treated other works in the collection in the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>15</sup>

Van Gogh Bulletin 9 (1994), no. 2, p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Letter 394/329: 'We're discussing 2 batches of old paint – which are just damaged on the outside, but I will also need brushes, canvas, watercolours and Whatman paper.' The other two other works painted on the same type of canvas are cats. 4 and 5.

<sup>14</sup> De la Faille 1928 claimed the picture was marouflaged, and this was later taken up in other œuvrecatalogues, although Vanbeselaere 1937 speaks of 'panel' (p. 238), while

De la Faille 1939 and 1970 notes 'cardboard.'

<sup>15</sup> In July 1970, the old canvas was impregnated with wax and resin; from this we may conclude that the second support had long since disappeared.

## 4 Two women in the moor

NIEUW-AMSTERDAM,  
OCTOBER 1883

Oil on canvas  
27.8 x 36.5 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 129 V/1962  
F 19 JH 409

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 20 x 17 (thin) threads,  
medium weave, edges cropped,  
wax resin lining. Ground  
difficult to determine. Brush  
size: varying from narrow to  
wide. Varnished.

PROVENANCE

November 1883-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger;  
1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962  
Vincent van Gogh Foundation;  
1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on  
permanent loan to the  
Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 16,  
vol. 2, pl. vi; Vanbeselaere 1937,  
pp. 238, 244, 397, 414;  
De la Faille 1939, p. 47, no. 23;  
Van Dantzig 1952, pp. 67-71 and  
pl. 12; Tralbaut 1959, pp. 93,  
206-07, no. 2, p. 223;  
De la Faille 1970, pp. 49, 612;  
Amsterdam 1987, pp. 118-19,  
316, no. 1.58; Rome 1988, no. 3;  
Hulsker 1996, pp. 96-97.

EXHIBITIONS

1947 Groningen, no. 1; 1948-49  
The Hague, no. 1; 1953  
The Hague, no. 15; 1953 Otterlo

Following a brief stay in Hoogeveen, Van Gogh moved to Nieuw-Amsterdam at the beginning of October 1883. Not long after he drew a 'little sketch from the moor' in one of his letters (fig. 4a), adding 'I'd like to make something out of this rough sketch of women in the moor, and I'm going to go back to the same field again' [396/331]. *Two women in the moor* is the result.

There has been some controversy over what precisely these women are doing. The woman to the left is filling a – barely visible – basket, and her neighbour appears to be doing the same, but what they are actually gathering is unclear. In 1928, De la Faille suggested they were digging potatoes. In 1937, Vanbeselaere called the painting *Transporting peat*, although without any further explanation.<sup>1</sup> Tralbaut, like De la Faille, believed they were harvesting potatoes, while Pollock later characterised them as 'women cutting peat'.<sup>2</sup>

Peat-cutting, however, was men's work, and the season was long over when Van Gogh painted his picture.<sup>3</sup> Women often stacked and turned the sods, but what is taking place here seems too detailed for that.<sup>4</sup> To the left is a so-called *slagkrooi*, a type of



4a Sketch in a letter to Theo of 6-7  
October 1883 (396/331). Amsterdam,  
Van Gogh Museum.

wheelbarrow which, although usually associated with peat work, was often used for other activities as well; it thus provides no clue as to what the women are actually doing.<sup>5</sup> Nor does the basket. Baskets were used for both collecting potatoes and sods for the stalls (fig. 4b).<sup>6</sup> Since the potato harvest was already over in September, we may conclude that the women are picking up sods that have been cut by their menfolk.<sup>7</sup> Because we do not know exactly how this was done, this interpretation, too, remains speculative.

The thick, laboured surface makes it difficult to determine how the picture was built up, although we do know that the composition only achieved its final form after a certain amount of overpainting. The earlier version, as seen in the x-ray (fig. 4f), is more or less identical to the letter sketch, which depicts four figures.<sup>8</sup> Only the woman to the left has disappeared, and the wheelbarrow has been moved slightly to the right. It seems Van Gogh later used this first rendering for the background of a large drawing (fig. 4e), merely excluding the little figure to the right.<sup>9</sup> He then drastically altered the composition, painting out the figure to the right, and sacrificing the pile of peat at the extreme left in order to shift the left-hand woman more to the right, thus creating a more compact image. In order to give the whole a sense of depth, Van Gogh originally made the woman at the right somewhat larger than the one to the left; he corrected this in the second version, however, giving them the same proportions. The paint was not yet completely dry, and so-called drying cracks have developed in the overpainted areas; these were so large and ugly that they were eventually filled in.<sup>10</sup> The work was thus not exhibited until after the middle of this century: the extreme craquelure had made it quite unattractive.<sup>11</sup>

*Two women in the moor* can be seen as a kind of sequel to *The potato diggers*, painted in The Hague shortly before Van Gogh left for Drenthe (fig. 4f). He had made every effort in this ambitious painting to achieve a balance between the earth, the sky and the figures. It is based on a drawing with which he was not completely satisfied.<sup>12</sup> He was unsure ‘Whether the earth and the figures need to brought together to form a dark silhouette against the light sky – or if the earth and sky should form a hazy whole, against which the more tonal figures stand out’ [373/308]. In the end he opted for the former, but the

& Amsterdam, no. 15; 1953-54  
Saint Louis, Philadelphia &  
Toledo, no. 24; 1955 Antwerp 1,  
no. 41; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 14;  
1956 Leeuwarden, no. 2; 1961  
Annen, no. 11; 1965-66 Stock-  
holm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 1,  
no cat. known; 1967 Hoogeveen,  
no. 10; 1980 Utrecht, unnum-  
bered; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no.  
96; 1986 Osaka, no. 14; 1988  
Rome, no. 3; 1993 Tokyo, no. 1;  
1996 Vienna, no. 52; 1998-99  
Amsterdam, no catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> De la Faille 1928; Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 238, although he writes elsewhere (p. 244) of Women in a field, with wheelbarrows of turf.

<sup>2</sup> Tralbaut 1959, pp. 92-93 and Amsterdam 1980-81, p. 92. Exhibition catalogues have tended to give the painting the more neutral title ‘Two women in a field.’ The 1987 catalogue of the Van Gogh Museum’s collection sought to follow Van Gogh’s own lead, calling it Two women in the peat-field (Amsterdam 1987, p. 316, no. 158). This led Sjaar van Heugten to suggest in both Rome 1988 and Tokyo 1993 that some kind of peat work was going on, but without defining exactly what.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gogh only saw the peat being shipped, as indicated in letter 399/335. He illustrated this in the Peat-arge (F 21 JH 415), now in the Drenths Museum in Assen.

<sup>4</sup> On the division of labour in peat extraction see D. van Haer, ‘De vervening vanaf 1850,’ in M.A.W. Gerding et al., Geschiedenis van Emmen en Zuid-Oost Drenthe, Meppel & Amsterdam 1989, pp. 117-20. Furthermore, the small mounds on the right can hardly be identified with the systematically ordered piles of peat on the fields. Similar mounds can be seen in a letter sketch depicting a peasant harrowing a field (F - JH 420), but here it is probably fertiliser waiting to be spread.

<sup>5</sup> The idea that the two women are extracting peat is based not so much on the image itself, but rather on the letter, cited above, in which Van Gogh speaks explicitly of the veen (‘moor’) [396/331]. However, this word, was used to

describe large areas of land with various types of soil, used for both peat extraction and farming. Seeing as the artist later mentioned 'sand,' it appears that we are dealing with here is a piece of land that was good for neither commercial peat extraction nor agriculture, and was probably used by the workers for their own needs.

6 Combined with animal excrement, these sods were used as fertiliser; see Bieleman 1985, pp. 342-43.

7 Van Gogh depicted various kinds of field work during his sojourn in Drenthe: harrowing, ploughing and the collecting of left over potatoes, (F 1096 JH 411, F - JH 420 and F - JH 422), but not potato harvesting itself. Wout Dijk and Meent van der Sluis, 'Boerinnen in het avondlicht rooiden geen aardappels,' Drents Groningse Dagbladen (1 August 1998), also pointed out that the women's poses are not those of potato lifters. This activity required moving over the field on the knees, as shows Lifting potatoes, painted in The Hague (fig. 4e).

8 See Van Heugten 1995. The overpainting was already noted by Van Dantzig in 1952; he also published an x-ray (p. 68, pl. 12).

painting remained unfinished, indicating that he was unhappy with the results.

Van Gogh tackled this artistic problem once again in Drenthe, if only in a small-scale study. He had originally toyed with the idea of setting the figures in *The potato diggers* against a background of 'violet-grey mist' [373/308], and he used the same colour in *Two women in the moor*, in the earliest version of the sky. In the course of painting, however, a dark, blue-grey tone was layered over it, although bits of violet do continue to show through (fig. 4c). The original orange-red stripe on the horizon has also mostly disappeared. The coloration thus came to resemble that of Georges Michel (1763-1843), with his 'grey sky (even slate grey) [and] brownish earth with yellow-grey' [397/332].<sup>13</sup>

Like *Cottages* (cat. 3) and *Farm with stacks of peat* (cat. 5), *Two women in the moor* is painted on fine canvas. When it was restored by J.C. Traas in 1929, the picture did not have a cardboard support – like *Farm with stacks of peat* – but was rather mounted on a stretcher. This was replaced and the picture relined; the paint layer was 'cleaned, retouched and varnished.'<sup>14</sup>



4b Collecting peat. Photograph from Bieleman 1985.



4c Detail of cat. 4.



4 Two women in the moor

Simply because Van Gogh wrote to his brother that he planned to 'make something out of this little rough sketch' this does not necessarily mean the painting was based on the image in the letter. It is also not impossible that the sketch is a reduced copy of a – now lost – drawing of the same motif.

9 The drawing, described in letter 396/331, was done in pencil and preceded the painting.

The bending women in the background are sketched in pen and, although the sheet itself was undoubtedly begun outdoors, we can assume that Van Gogh added these and the other parts done in ink only later, in the studio, although the sheet itself was undoubtedly begun outdoors. Dijk and Van der Sluis, *op. cit.* (note 7) believed they could identify the location depicted in the drawing, and thus the field in our painting, but their conclusions are impossible to verify.

10 We do not know exactly when. The cracks can be seen clearly in the illustration in Vanbeselaere 1937 (fig. 21) and in De la Faille 1939, but these could also be reproductions from old photographs.

11 De la Faille 1970, p. 612, erroneously stated that Two women was exhibited in Rotterdam in 1903 (no. 13). The painting was evidently identified from Jacobson 1903, p. 115, who described 'Aardappelroosters (No. 13)' as 'a Millet-like thing, where the bodies of the women digging stand out wonderfully against the sky.' The picture he is referring to is not the painting in the Van Gogh Museum but rather

F 96 JH 878.

12 F 1034 JH 372.

13 On the dating of this letter see cat. 3, fn. 11.

14 Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962). The bill was dated by V.W. van Gogh to 2 January 1930. The restoration must therefore have taken place at the end of 1929.

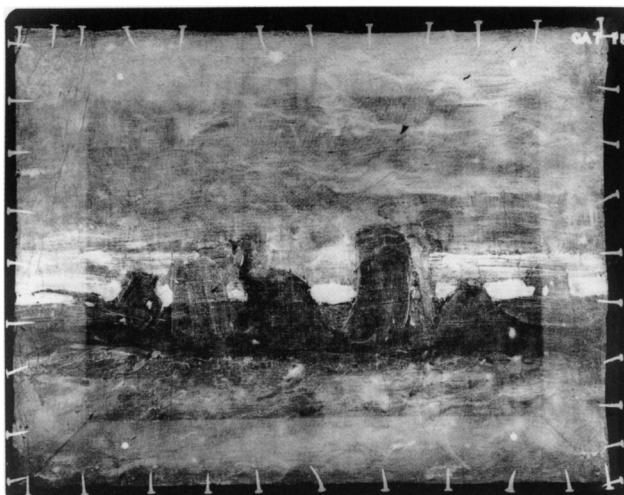
15 Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 245.

16 Sensier 1881, p. 180 (cited from a review by Edmond About).

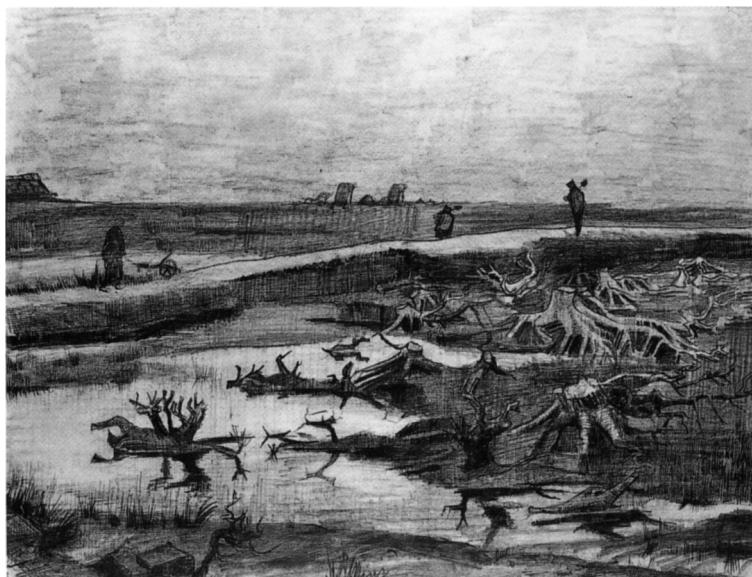
17 Van Gogh sent '6 studies' [408/341]. For his letters from Drenthe see cat. 3, fn. 7.

18 Letter from E.J. van Wisselingh to Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, 2 December 1893 (inv. b 2938 V/1982). On Theo's reaction to Van Gogh's Drenthe pictures see cat. 5.

In 'The potato diggers', Van Gogh had sought to capture 'a certain spirit of devotion' [358/295], and his aim was certainly similar here. He achieved 'hieratic solemnity' – as Vanbeselaere put it<sup>15</sup> – by making the figures stand out against the sky and by rhythmically repeating their poses; certainly inspired by Millet's *Gleaners* of 1857



4<sup>d</sup> X-ray of cat. 4.



4<sup>e</sup> Landscape with bog trunks (F 1095 JH 406), 1883. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

(Paris, Musée d'Orsay). In his 1881 biography of the painter, much admired by Van Gogh, Sensier described this work as 'peinture religieuse'.<sup>16</sup>

Vincent sent Theo *Two women in the moor*, together with five others pictures, around the middle of November.<sup>17</sup> He asked his brother to show the studies to the Dutch art dealer E.J. van Wisselingh (1849-1912) 'as a little sign of life. I'm not, of course, thinking of them in terms of sales' [408/341]. It seems unlikely Theo ever carried out this request. He did not think much of the pictures his brother had painted in Drenthe, and probably did not wish to see his judgment confirmed by Van Wisselingh. In 1893, the dealer openly admitted that he could 'not understand the [high] opinion some artists have of [Vincent's] work' – and there is no reason to think that he felt differently in 1883.<sup>18</sup>



4f *The potato diggers* (F 9 JH 385),  
1883. Private collection.

## 5 Farm with stacks of peat

NIEUW-AMSTERDAM,  
MID-NOVEMBER 1883

Oil on canvas  
37.5 × 55.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 130 V/1962  
F 22 JH 421

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 20 × 17 (thin) threads,  
medium weave, edges cropped,  
wax resin lining. Formerly  
canvas on cardboard. Ground  
difficult to determine. Brush  
size: varying from narrow to  
wide. Varnished. Details: weave  
imprints.

PROVENANCE

November 1883-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger;  
1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62  
on loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van  
Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on  
loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent  
loan to the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

LETTERS

404/339, 434/358, 450/369.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 17,  
vol. 2, pl. v; Vanbeselaere 1937,  
pp. 239, 243, fn. 1, pp. 248, 414;  
De la Faille 1939, p. 50, no. 28;  
Tralbaut 1959, pp. 208-09,  
no. 5, p. 224; De la Faille 1970,  
pp. 50, 612; Amsterdam 1987,  
p. 316, no. 159; Hulsker 1996,  
pp. 96, 99.

Thanks to a letter from mid-November 1883, *Farm with stacks of peat* can be quite accurately dated, thanks to a letter from mid-November 1883. It includes two sketches after landscapes Van Gogh then had 'on the easel' [404/339]; the lower one is the picture here under discussion (fig. 5a). According to the artist, the painting depicts 'a delicate green wheatfield in the foreground & withered grass behind the house & stacks of peat, yet another view of the moor and the sky, very light.' He later described the work as 'the largest of the sod huts, the one with a little green field in the foreground' [434/358].<sup>1</sup>



5a Sketch in a letter to Theo of c.

15 November 1883 (434/358).

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.



5 Farm with stacks of peat

## EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 3  
 [Dfl.500]; 1931 Amsterdam,  
 no. 9; 1948-49 The Hague,  
 no. 3; 1953 Assen, no. 30; 1955  
 Antwerp 1, no. 42; 1955  
 Amsterdam, no. 15; 1957  
 Marseilles, no. 5; 1957-58 Stock-  
 holm, no. 99, Luleå, Kiruna,  
 Umeå, Östersund, Sandviken &  
 Gothenburg, no cat. known;  
 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 1; 1960-61  
 The Hague, unnumbered; 1961  
 Annen, no. 12; 1967 Hoogeveen,  
 no. 11; 1969-70 Los Angeles,  
 Saint Louis, Philadelphia &  
 Columbus, no. 2; 1970-71 Balti-  
 more, San Francisco & New  
 York, no. 2; 1971-72 Paris, no. 2;  
 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 98;  
 1997 Assen, unnumbered;  
 1998-99 Amsterdam, no cata-  
 logue.

Van Gogh had moved to the peat district of Nieuw-Amsterdam at the beginning of October, and the location depicted was probably somewhere nearby.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to the other surviving study of a Drenthe cottage (*cat. 3*), the building shown here is not a former peat-worker's dwelling. It is slightly too tall. It is probably a *keuterij*, a barn where grain or hay was stored above a stall.<sup>3</sup> The piles to the left are possibly stacks of peat, and the light-green field may be planted with winter rye, usually sown in the second half of September.<sup>4</sup>

Van Gogh speaks of 'withered grass behind the house,' but the only element that could be interpreted as such is the reddish-brown patch to the right. In all likelihood, this uncultivated area lay somewhat higher than the field to the left, which had certainly been levelled. The form in the background is doubtless another house. The projections on the right side of the building are presumably part of the skeletal framework used to build the roof.

As in *Cottages* (*cat. 3*), Van Gogh has again sought to create a harmonious balance between the dark foreground and lighter sky. The sand in the paint indicates that the scene was executed on the spot. The building up of the work is difficult to determine; the last portions to have been completed, however, must have been the moss on the roof and the little bush to the right of the barn, as both are painted in the same dark green.

The picture is painted on fine canvas, like *Cottages* and *Two women in the moor* (*cats. 3 and 4*). It was marouflaged with cardboard at an early date. This support was removed in 1930 by J.C. Traas, who used the opportunity to treat the picture extensively.<sup>5</sup>

Van Gogh sent the painting to Theo, along with five others, around the middle of November 1883.<sup>6</sup> The paint must have been barely dry. The impasto areas exhibit weave imprints, which probably occurred during transport, when other works may have been pressed accidentally against the soft top layer.<sup>7</sup>

Although Van Gogh found his Nuenen images of weavers better 'than the painted studies from Drenthe' [429/355], he was nonetheless hurt when Theo dismissed *Farm with stacks of peat* and another (lost) study of a hut as mere imitations of Georges Michel.<sup>8</sup> 'You would probably say the same of the old cemetery,' Vincent lamented. 'And yet, I wasn't thinking of Michel when I painted either cemetery or the sod huts, but only of the motif in front of me. [A] motif which – indeed, I think – Michel would have approved if

<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh used the word 'keet,' which means hut or cottage. See Michiel A.W. Gerding, 'De mythe van de veenarbeid,' in Boudien de Vries et al., *De kracht der zwakken: Studies over arbeid en arbeidersbeweging in het verleden. Opstellen aangeboden aan Theo van Tijn*, Amsterdam 1992, p. 320.

<sup>2</sup> Although the painting contains nothing that would help identify the location, Wout Dijk and Meent van der Sluis have attempted to do just that (letter of 3 December 1997). Their findings, however, are purely speculative. The results of their research are due to be published in the Drents Groningse Dagbladen.

<sup>3</sup> With thanks to Michiel A.W. Gerding, Assen, local historian of Drenthe, who supplied the information on the types of cottages and peat stacks.

<sup>4</sup> In his letter, Van Gogh writes of 'turfshopen' or stacks of peat, but it is not absolutely certain that this is what the piles were made of. Peat was usually neatly stacked, and only the pile to the right can be so described. The form is indeed somewhat rounded (although less so than the mounds to the left), but may be covered with foliage, which would not have been unusual at

he had happened to come along. For my part, I would never think to compare myself with master Michel – but I certainly don't *imitate* him either' [434/358].<sup>9</sup>

Georges Michel (1763–1843) was relatively unknown in his own lifetime, but his paintings – modelled on Dutch seventeenth century landscapes – achieved a certain reputation after 1870 as forerunners of the pictures of the Barbizon School. Van Gogh had read Sensier's biography of the artist in 1875, becoming a great admirer of the 'French Ruysdael,' as he was called.<sup>10</sup> While in Drenthe he used Michel's example to try and convince Theo to become a painter, too: 'I would love to see you get right down to work; landscapes in the spirit of Michel, that's what you'll find here' [404/339]. At the time Van Gogh was also doing 'things in that genre,' although he always avoided claiming that they were in any way really 'Michels' [404/339]. He counted *Farm with stacks of peat* among these pictures, and this candid admission of influence must have made him feel Theo's later criticism – no matter how tactfully formulated – was particularly mean-spirited.

Van Gogh desperately wanted his brother to recognise his talent, but as he apparently thought the Drenthe pictures were unsaleable, Vincent came up with another scheme. 'Well, I might try to sell something in Antwerp, and I want to get one or two of those Drenthe studies put in black frames – which I've been looking for at a local carpenter's – I prefer to see my pictures in dark, black frames, and he can make them cheaply enough' [434/358]. We do not know if he ever carried out this plan, but he did temporarily cease sending his studies to Theo. Nonetheless, the cottage motif continued to intrigue him, and he wrote to his brother at the end of May 1884 that he had painted 'a weaver's hut in twilight, something like the sod hut in Drenthe' [450/369].<sup>11</sup>

the time. On the sowing of winter rye, one of the most ancient crops in Drenthe, see C.H. Edelman (ed.), *Harm Tiesing over landbouw en volksleven in Drenthe*, 2 vols., Assen 1974, vol. 1, pp. 154, 159.

5 Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh for his work in 1930 (inv. b 4207 V/1962): 'Cardboard removed, cleaned, relined, retouched and varnished.'

6 Letter 408/341; on this shipment and the dating of this letter see cat. 3, fn. 7.

7 To prevent sticking, Van Gogh placed sheets of paper between the works in this first shipment (letter 392/327). He apparently failed to take this precaution here, however.

8 Letter 434/358: 'some of the things may be a bit superficial, I admit – but what do I hear [from you] about the ones I simply [...] painted outside, not trying to put anything into them but what I saw? I hear: Aren't you a bit too preoccupied with Michel? (I'm talking here about the study of a cottage in the dark and the largest of the sod huts, the one with a little green field in the foreground.) The first work has not survived, although we do know what it looked like from a drawing and a letter sketch (F 1097 JH 418 and F – JH 419).

9 Van Gogh made a sketch after the cemetery picture in letter 390/325 (F – JH 396). The painting itself has been lost.

10 Quoted from Albert Sensier, *Étude sur Georges Michel*, Paris 1873, p. 92. Van Gogh read the biography in September 1875 and immediately recommended it to his brother (see letters 44/36, 45/36a and 52/40). He also thought his father and Anton Mauve should read it (letters 65/51 and 73/59), and when he decided to become an artist in 1880 he asked his brother to return the copy he had lent him (letter 156/135). Van Gogh actually saw Michel's paintings when he paid a visit to Durand-Ruel's gallery in Paris in 1875, (letter 72/58).

11 We do not know which picture he is here referring to. On this motif see cat. 27, especially fn. 12.

## 6 Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen

JANUARY-FEBRUARY 1884  
AND AUTUMN 1885

Oil on canvas  
41.3 x 32.1 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 3 V/1962  
F 25 JH 521

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 x 17 (thick) threads, densely woven, original tacking edges, wax resin lining. Original stretcher. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: vary from very narrow to narrow. Varnished.

PROVENANCE

January/February 1884-1907  
A.C. van Gogh-Carbentus,  
Nuenen/Leiden; 1907-30  
A.C. van Houten-van Gogh,  
Dieren; 1930-58 S.M. de Jong-  
van Houten, Haarlem; 1951-54  
on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1958  
bought by the Vincent van Gogh  
Foundation; 1960 Theo van  
Gogh Foundation; 1958-62 on  
loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van  
Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on  
loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent  
loan to the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

LETTER  
429/355.

LITERATURE

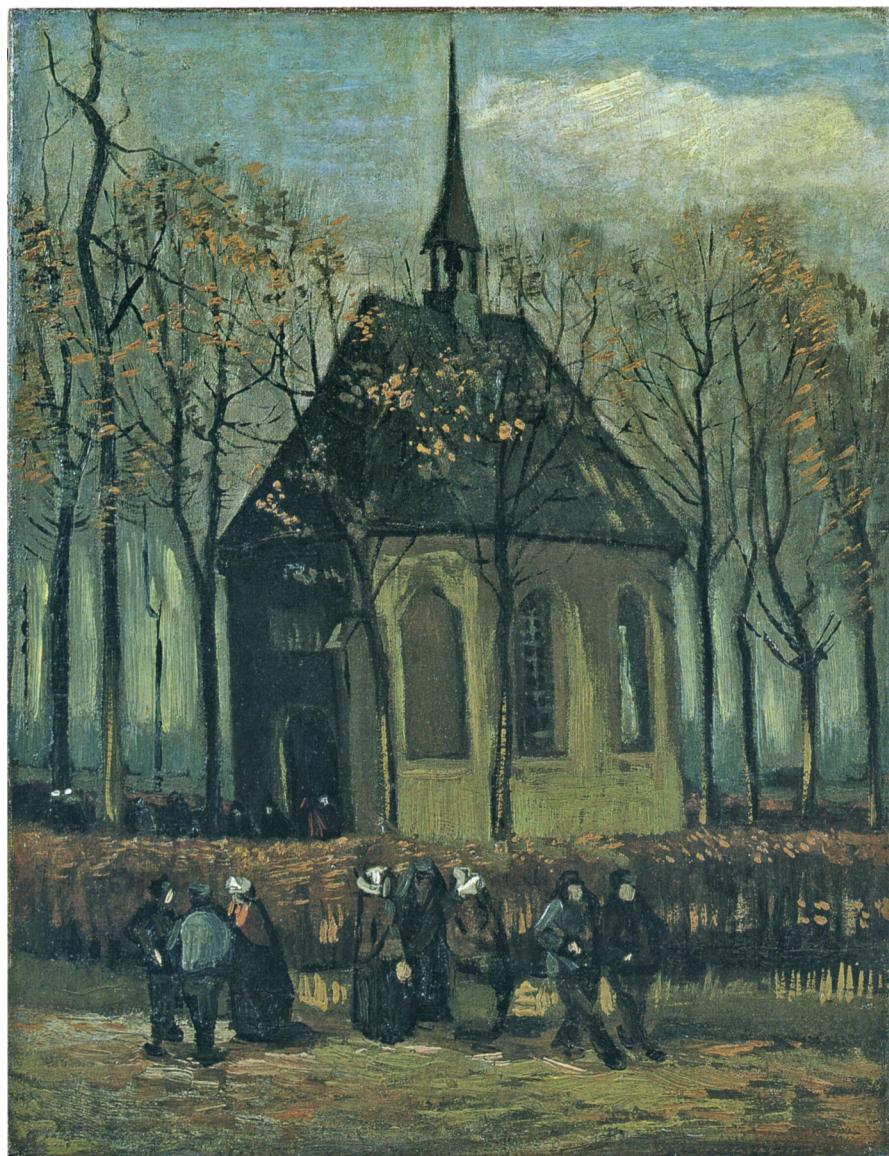
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 18,  
vol. 2, pl. VIII; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 281, 414; De la Faille  
1939, p. 51, no. 29; De la Faille

This little picture was painted around the end of January or the beginning of February 1884. Van Gogh was then living with his parents in Nuenen, having arrived in early December 1883.<sup>1</sup> It shows the church of the local Reformed congregation, where his father had preached since 1882 (fig. 6a). The building, with its bricked-up window, dates from 1824, and is here quite accurately depicted.<sup>2</sup> Van Gogh reproduces the church from a rather low point of view. Oddly enough, he has eliminated the bars on the window to the right. Either he simply forgot them or – more likely – he felt they hindered the portrayal of the reflections in the glass. The lighter area above the door represents a plaque with the Bible.<sup>3</sup>

The painting was a gift to his mother, who had broken her thigh on 17 January.<sup>4</sup> Van Gogh had just begun his series of weaver paintings, but interrupted his work to help his sister Willemien nurse her. ‘Mother seems to be in a good mood, very stable and satisfied, despite her difficult position. She amuses herself with little things,’ he told Theo at the beginning of February. ‘I painted the church with its shrubs and trees for her recently. Something like this’ [429/355] (fig. 6b).<sup>5</sup>



6a The Reformed church at Nuenen, postcard, c. 1904. Nuenen, J.C. Jegerings photograph collection.



6 Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen

1970, pp. 51, 612; Hulsker 1980, pp. 122-23, 126; De Brouwer 1984, pp. 28-31; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 122-23, 317, no. 1.63; Amsterdam 1988-89, pp. 60-61; Op de Coul 1987, p. 93; Hulsker 1993, pp. 20-21; Van Heugten 1995, pp. 66-67, no. 2; Hulsker 1996, pp. 106-07; Paris 1998-99, pp. 81-82, 164, no. 35.

## EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 29 [not for sale]; 1953 Zundert, no. 10; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 5; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 9; 1953 Assen, no. 9; 1957 Essen, no. 164; 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 2; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 1; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 1; 1963 Sheffield, no. 1; 1963 Humlebaek, no. 1; 1964 Washington & New York, no. 1; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 3; 1968-69 London, no. 19; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 7b; 1971-72 Paris, no. 3; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 138; 1996 Den Bosch, no. 133; 1997 Tokyo, no. 2; 1998-99 Paris, no. 35.

Despite the rather offhand nature of these remarks, the painting must have been more than simply a nice gesture to please his mother during her illness. Things had been tense in the Van Gogh household since Vincent's arrival in December, but that changed following the accident. It had 'overshadowed many another question [...]', he wrote Theo, and made things go 'a little more smoothly'; he even abandoned his plan to leave again as soon as possible [429/355].<sup>6</sup> This 'portrait' of his father's church, given to his mother as a gift, may have been designed to seal their new truce. Although it was primarily meant for his mother, the choice of subject indicates that he also sought to please his father. It was Van Gogh's first painting for his parents – and probably also the first picture completed in Nuenen.<sup>7</sup>

The above-mentioned sketch in the letter to Theo (fig. 6b) is quite different from the finished painting. Van Gogh later reworked the foreground and other areas, as we see in the x-ray (fig. 6c).<sup>8</sup> At a certain point he replaced the labourer with a spade with the procession of churchgoers. The worker's blue smock is still visible in the scarf of the woman to the left in the central group, and her right hand is more or less identical to his. The worshippers at the door were added in the same session, and the cold, wintery trees and hedges made more autumnal. The path in the foreground was also transformed by the addition of new colours, among them light green, orange, pink and ochre. Van Gogh employed the ochre again for the trunks of the trees. He used dark blue to add the little tree to the left, and also for the gnarled branches of the third tree to the right of the church. He lightened the areas between the trees, and there are tiny,

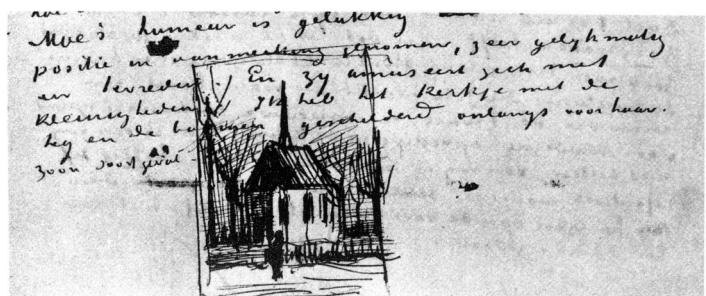
<sup>1</sup> Since his arrival, Vincent had been agonising over whether to leave again or not. See fn. 6.

<sup>2</sup> For a short history of the church and the location see De Brouwer 1984, pp. 28-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28. The text was from Matt. 21:25.

<sup>4</sup> See letters 424/352 and 425/...

<sup>5</sup> Hulsker 1993, p. 31 dates the letter to c. 24 January 1884, but it was probably written between 28 January and 10 February. The letter mentions a 'kind of litter' for his mother which, according to a letter from Vincent's father to Theo (inv. b 2251 V/1962, dated 1 February 1884), was made on Monday, 28 January. There is also mention of a gift of f100 from



6b Sketch in a letter to Theo of early February 1884 (429/355). Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.

light-blue dots in the tree to the extreme left and on the church tower. The earlier, tonal image was thus literally eclipsed; only the church, the sky and some of the trees remained as they were.

Before beginning the first version, Van Gogh had made a drawing in pen and ink (fig. 6d); this was certainly nothing more than an indispensable initial exploration of the motif. The painting was not executed after the drawing, as the labourer is further to the right in the sheet and the church appears more elongated. The drawing may have been done on the spot, but must have served as little more than an *aide-mémoire* when it came to carrying out the actual canvas, undoubtedly in the studio.<sup>9</sup>

It seems unlikely that the 'original' painting was anything but a simple document of his father's place of work. The building itself dated from the early nineteenth century; in contrast to the medieval

*Uncle Cor to Father Van Gogh.* The latter mentioned this 'windfall' in his letter to Theo of 10 February (inv. b 2252 V/1962).

6 The problems, as he wrote, had to do with issues in which he saw 'things quite differently from Pa and Ma.' Nonetheless, he concluded that it was 'possible I may stay in Nuenen longer than I originally thought' [429/355]. The conflicts mainly had to do with his affair with Sien Hoornik, but also with his parents' strict attitudes, which still caused him considerable difficulties. For an excellent analysis of Vincent's relationship with his parents and Theo, see Hulsker 1990, pp. 169-75.

7 He had already begun work on the weaver paintings, but had not yet finished them, as indicated by letter 429/355.

8 Hulsker 1980, pp. 106, 123 originally thought



6c X-ray of cat. 6.



6d The Dutch Reformed church in Nuenen (F 1117 JH 446), 1884. Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.

Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen was not the picture described and sketched in the letter. He believed that work had been lost, while he dated the work here under discussion to the autumn of 1884 – a view later adopted by other authors. The reworking of the canvas was first mentioned in Amsterdam 1987, p. 122. The first version was dated to January, and the repainting to October 1884 (p. 317).

The x-ray was published a year later in Amsterdam 1988-89, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup> Heenk 1995, p. 112 proposed that the sheet 'was used to finish the painting,' pointing out the reflections in the window on the right and the position of the trees; however, Van Gogh did not necessarily need the drawing for either element – and certainly not if he composed the painting on the spot. Moreover, the right-hand window in the drawing has its transoms and mullions, whereas Van Gogh eliminated these in the painting.

<sup>10</sup> One cannot therefore simply apply Van Gogh's explanation of the old church tower at Nuenen (cat. 28) to Congregation leaving the Reformed church without any qualifications. In Amsterdam 1987, p. 122, Van Uitert, for example, claimed that Van Gogh's aim was to depict 'the pious life of the peasants, who were so close to nature', while Rosenblum 1975, p. 74 believed that the image not only tells us something about 'this relic of Christian architecture' (the author mistakenly took the nineteenth-century church for a work of the Middle Ages), but also 'about its role in the religious life of those peasants who are seen leaving its sanctified walls.' For Van Gogh, however, religion was closely bound up with notions of immortality, and it seems impossible that he would have tried to express this through the depiction of a modern church. That he would have chosen the Reformed congregation as a symbol is equally unlikely; this congregation, which had only 35 members, was completely unrepresentative of the predominantly Catholic village. See also Frank Kools, Vincent van Gogh en zijn geboorteplaats. Als een boer van Zundert, Zutphen 1990, p. 123.

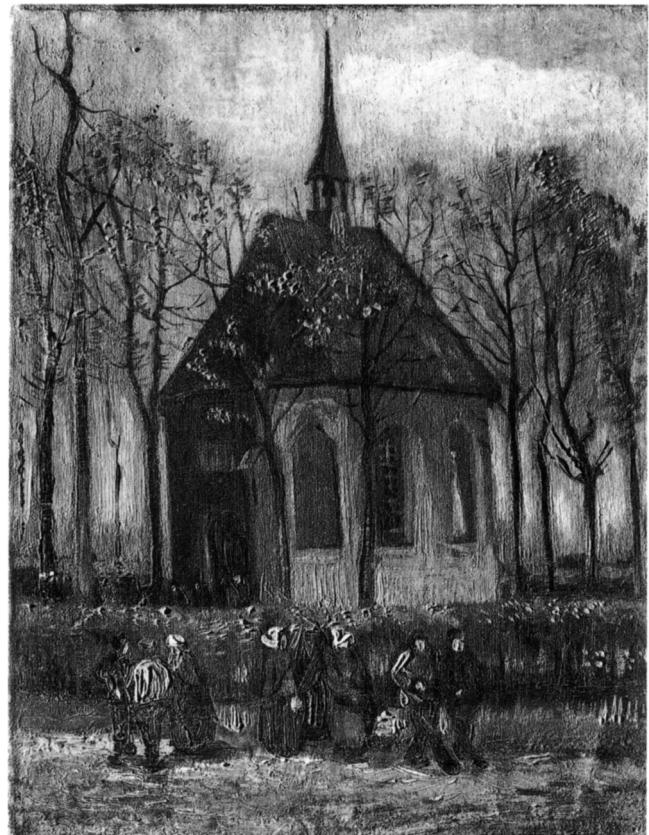
<sup>11</sup> Van Gogh had seen this painting himself and greatly admired it. See cat. 28, fn. 8 and Louis van Tilborgh, "Les religions passent, Dieu demeure," in Paris 1998-99, pp. 80-89.

<sup>12</sup> Hulsker 1993, p. 21. Van Heugten 1995, p. 66, fn. 3 thought the work could have been

church in the fields Van Gogh often depicted (see cat. 28), it cannot be considered part of the ancient, primitive country world he sought to capture in Nuenen.<sup>10</sup> He may have added the peasant to the otherwise empty foreground simply to make the subject more interesting. The figure was borrowed almost literally from Jean-François Millet's *Church at Gréville* (1872-75), which also shows a farm labourer walking by a church (fig. 28a).<sup>11</sup>

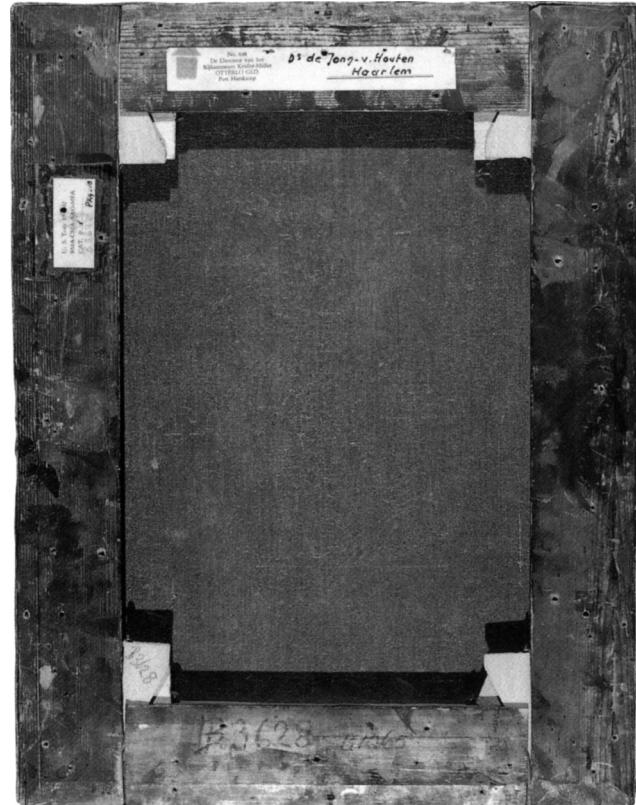
It is difficult to say when exactly Van Gogh replaced the man with the churchgoers, or changed the wintery scene into something more autumnal. One possibility is the autumn of 1884, but as he was then again in conflict with his parents this seems rather unlikely.<sup>12</sup> Hulsker thus believed the work was repainted shortly after Van Gogh gave it away – whether at his mother's request or not.<sup>13</sup>

There is, however, little evidence to support this suggestion. The first layer of paint was already dry when the image was



6e Raking-light photograph of cat. 6.

retouched. Still more important, raking light (fig. 6e) reveals that Van Gogh employed a more impasto technique in the final version, in addition to the completely new colours – as if he had completely forgotten his old, sombre palette.<sup>14</sup> Where once he would have preferred black, he now chose dark blue. Striking, too, is that he reworked the canvas with looser, faster brushstrokes and used complementary colours, such as orange-brown against light blue. This indicates that the picture was repainted much later than has previously been thought. Van Gogh only discovered the theory of complementary colours in the course of 1884, and did not begin using it in a free and undogmatic fashion before the following year. The light-handed treatment of the foreground and more cheerful colours are reminiscent of his paintings from the autumn of 1885.<sup>15</sup> The changes to *Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen* can thus be dated to just this time.



6f Verso of cat. 6.

reworked in the spring of 1884, while *Op de Coul* 1987, p. 93 gave no exact date, writing only of a later time [...] when he was more skilled in the use of colour.'

13 Hulsker 1993, p. 21.

14 This was first touched upon – although only briefly – in *Op de Coul* 1987 (p. 93).

15 See, for example, the Avenue with poplars, Rotterdam, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen (F 45 JH 959).

16 Hulsker 1993, p. 21 and Van Heugten 1995, p. 67.

17 On these imitations see Louis van Tilborgh and Sjraar van Heugten, 'Semeurs,' in Paris 1998-99, pp. 94-98.

18 The exact nature of the woman's dress was first pointed out by *Op de Coul* 1987, p. 93) and Van Uitert, in Amsterdam 1987, p. 122.

The women in the background could, however, simply be wearing hoods.

19 This shawl was worn to funerals and to church after the birth of a child. See cats. 7 and 20.

20 Vincent's mother's birthday was 10 September, and it is not impossible he reworked the picture for this occasion.

21 Van Gogh's mother's pictures have never been thoroughly researched, and it is certainly difficult to determine which ones they were. An unpublished document in a private collection indicates that Johanna van Gogh-Bonger received six paintings after her mother-in-law's death. With the help of this new source, Van Gogh's letters, the information on provenance supplied by the catalogue raisonné of 1970 and Feilchenfeldts provenance corrections (1988), it is now possible to ascribe the following paintings to her collection. In addition to Congregation leaving the Reformed church, she owned F 201 JH 1139, F 348 JH 1182, F 393 JH 1362, F 399 JH 1398, F 415 JH 1452, F 680 JH 1978, F 682 JH 1979, perhaps F 525 JH 1665, and the as-yet unidentified works 'Garden of the Tuilleries' and 'Peonies,' which is probably F 249 JH 1105.

22 The Paris still life was F 202 JH 1139. Originally, Anna owned only three full-fledged works by Vincent. This small number undoubtedly reflects her rather unfriendly attitude towards her brother; after their father's death, she tired to force him out of the house. In addition to the two works she inherited from her mother, she owned only one painting, F 696 JH 1786, which Theo probably gave her as a gift. She also had two pen and ink drawings, F 1193 JH 566 and F 1240

JH 469 – as well as two pieces of juvenilia, Juv. xxii and xxv. She apparently sold F 696 JH 1786 early on; only the two works from her mother and the two drawings are mentioned in H.J. Calkoen, 'Notities rondom Vincent van Gogh,' Weekblad van de Nederlandse Protestantse Bond, 1 March 1952.

<sup>23</sup> This foundation was set up by V.W. van Gogh in the early 1950s and was transformed into the Theo van Gogh Foundation in 1960. It should not be confused with the (second) Vincent van Gogh Foundation, founded that same year, to which the works from the family's collection were transferred in 1962. See Johan van Gogh, 'The history of the collection,' Amsterdam 1987, p. 7.

<sup>24</sup> Letter from V.W. van Gogh to S. de Jong-van Houten, 28 August 1958 (inv. b 6935 V/1996). The plans to create a museum dated from before the agreement made with the Dutch State in 1959, which eventually led to the foundation of today's museum in Amsterdam; see Gerald van Bronkhorst, 'Vincent Willem van Gogh and the Van Gogh Museum's pre-history,' Van Gogh Museum Journal (1995), pp. 29–30.

We can only speculate as to why Van Gogh reworked his image. Overpainting only part of a composition was certainly unusual. Hulsker has suggested that his mother was unhappy with the original picture, while Van Heugten believes that on closer examination the artist decided it was simply too reminiscent of Millet's *Church at Gréville*.<sup>16</sup> The former seems unlikely, given the date of the changes. The second seems equally improbable, as Van Gogh was otherwise unashamed of his rather literal borrowings from the French master, as his images of sowers from the Dutch period demonstrate.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps the grounds for the transformation should be sought not in the ingredients of the first version, but in the additions of the second – namely, the churchgoers. A striking feature is that the central woman in the foreground, as well as three other figures by the door of the church, are wrapped in a kind of long mourning shawl known as a *rouwfaal*.<sup>18</sup> This was worn exclusively by Catholic women, and was therefore hardly appropriate to a Reformed congregation.<sup>19</sup> It can therefore only be explained by an explicit wish to symbolise mourning in general. Since it is Reverend Van Gogh's church, this should probably be taken as a reference to his death on 26 March. By including these figures, Van Gogh literally 'updated' his mother's picture, most likely in the autumn of 1885 – at the



6g Photograph of Joan van Houten; Van Gogh's *Congregation leaving the Reformed church in Nuenen* can be seen in the background (right). Private collection.

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same time he painted the *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42), which also contains an allusion to his deceased father.<sup>20</sup>

In the end, Mother Van Gogh owned eleven of her son's paintings, of which the only one from the Nuenen period is *Congregation leaving the Reformed church*.<sup>21</sup> On her death in 1907 – together with a still life, dated 1886 – it passed to her daughter Anna, who had cared for her at the end of her life.<sup>22</sup> Anna died in 1930, and the painting came into the possession of her daughter Sara de Jong-van Houten (1880-1977). It can be seen in the background of a photograph of her father, Joan van Houten (1850-1945), probably taken at her home (fig. 6g).

We do not know when the work was relined. Interestingly, this painting is the only one from Van Gogh's Dutch period in the Van Gogh Museum to have definitely retained its original stretcher (fig. 6f; see also cat. 44). It exhibits many paint flecks; Van Gogh probably used it to clean his brushes.

The painting was purchased by the Vincent van Gogh Foundation from Anna's heirs in 1958.<sup>23</sup> Vincent Willem van Gogh had already made plans to house his collection in a special museum, and he considered this early, biographical picture by his uncle to be 'an asset to the collection and the museum, where it will always be on view.'<sup>24</sup>

## 7 Avenue of poplars in autumn

LATE OCTOBER 1884

Oil on canvas on panel  
99.0 x 66.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 141 M/1977  
F 122 JH 522

TECHNICAL DATA  
Canvas, 14 x 18 (medium)  
threads, medium weave,  
cropped edges, oak panel with  
bevelled edges. Cream-coloured  
ground, commercially primed,  
medium. Brush size: varying  
from narrow to extra wide.  
Varnished.

PROVENANCE  
November 1885-86 A.C. van  
Gogh-Carbentus, Nuenen/  
Breda; 1886-1902 Schrauwen,  
Breda [?]; 1902-04 W. van Bakel  
and C. Mouwen, Breda [?];  
1904-41 J.G.L. Nolst Trenité and  
E.C. Nolst Trenité-van Rossem,  
Rotterdam, bought by  
Kunstzalen Oldenzeel,  
Rotterdam, for f 1,100; 1941-60  
W. Nolst Trenité, Rotterdam;  
1960-77 heirs of W. Nolst  
Trenité, Rotterdam; 1977 bought  
by the Van Gogh Museum with  
the support of the Vincent van  
Gogh Foundation and the  
Vereniging Rembrandt.

LETTERS  
469/383, 528/415.

LITERATURE  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 43,  
vol. 2, pl. XXXIII; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 304, 400, 415;

In his first catalogue raisonné, De la Faille dated *Avenue of poplars in autumn* to the fall of 1885.<sup>1</sup> This was long accepted, but was finally overturned by Tralbaut in 1956, when he correctly associated the picture with a detailed description of a study in a letter from the end of October 1884.<sup>2</sup> 'The last thing I've done is a rather large study of an avenue of poplars with yellow autumn leaves. Here and there the sun makes glittering patches [...] on the ground, which alternate with the long shadows of the trunks. At the end of the path is a little farmhouse, and the blue sky shows through between the autumn leaves' [469/383].<sup>3</sup>

The painting was executed during Van Gogh's friend Anthon van Rappard's (1858-1892) second visit to Nuenen at the end of October 1884.<sup>4</sup> The leaves were just about to fall and the autumnal effects were 'extraordinarily pretty' [468/382]. Van Gogh had always loved this time of year, once even longing for 'a country where it is always fall' [277/R15]. One can almost feel the beautiful late summer in this sunlit avenue, which ends in a gabled farmhouse with a setback roof. This was the most common type in Nuenen and environs at the time; the artist shows us the front of the house, which has only windows and no door.<sup>5</sup> The alley is almost completely lined with poplars; the trees on the left with the yellow leaves are probably birches.

There was a long artistic tradition of depicting rows of trees in perspective, and Van Gogh had already sought to join it at the beginning of the year with a number of pen-and-ink drawings.<sup>6</sup> In the Van Gogh Museum's piece he has increased the interest of this simple, but also rather conventional, composition by depicting the path from a slightly raised point of view. The decision to enliven the foreground with a cropped tree trunk was as intelligent as it was established practice.<sup>7</sup>

Van Gogh did not, however, completely succeed in harmonising the composition. The left-hand side of the bridge – which almost seems to have been painted using a wide-angle lens – is completely out of proportion. Furthermore, the farmhouse in the



7 Avenue of poplars in autumn

De la Faille 1939, p. 117, no. 132; Essen 1957, no. 176; Tellegen 1967, pp. 8-15; De la Faille 1970, pp. 84, 616; Van Gogh 1976, pp. 57-59; Amsterdam 1987, p. 317, no. 162; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 220, 222, no. 87; Catalogue 1995, pp. 184-85; Tokyo 1995, p. 120, no. 2; Hulsker 1996, pp. 120, 122-23, 130.

## EXHIBITIONS

1904 Rotterdam, no. 21; 1907 Rotterdam, no. 6; 1927-28 Rotterdam, no. 23; 1940 Rotterdam, no catalogue; 1952 Milan, no. 59; 1953 The Hague, no. 41; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 31; 1956 Amsterdam, no. 27; 1956 Munich, no. 92; 1960 Paris, no. 19; 1961 Wolfsburg, no. 70; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 129; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 87; 1988 Rome, no. 7; 1989 Verona, unnumbered; 1992 London, no. 24; 1995 Tokyo, no. 2; 1998-99 Amsterdam, no catalogue.

background is much too large and the woman's shadow is not parallel to those of the trees and bridge. Nonetheless, these 'mistakes' in no way detract from the overall effect. They bring to mind Van Gogh's words of around a year later when, in defence of his badly proportioned figures, he claimed that his 'great desire' was to 'learn how to make such faults, such distortions, reworkings and transformations of reality, so that they may become, well, lies if you like – but lies that are more true than literal reality' [522/418].

The format is fairly large and the painting seems to be more than a mere a study of autumnal effects.<sup>8</sup> This is indicated by the woman at the right, dressed in a black blouse, blueish skirt and a so-called *rouwafelie* or mourning shawl, worn at funerals and for attending church following the birth of a child.<sup>9</sup> It was folded double and draped over the head, and was held closed with the hands. Here, the woman carries a portion over her arm, as we see again in a later drawing (*fig. 7a*).

It seems unlikely that Van Gogh was making reference here to either a specific funeral or church event. Instead, the woman seems to be a more general symbol of mourning; she grieves, and in a landscape appropriate to her mood, one that gives expression to the fact of mortality.<sup>10</sup> The image was meant to arouse feelings of melancholy in the viewer, to lead him to a deeper understanding of life and human nature. In this sense, it seems to be almost directly inspired by François Coppée's (1842-1908) *Tristement*, which Van Gogh had earlier sent to Van Rappard. In the poem, the sorrowful tenor is set by 'a veiled woman deep in mourning' walking along a path in autumn. The poet seeks to banish this sad image from his mind, but is unable to: 'En vain – pour dissiper ces images moroses / J'évoque ma jeunesse et ce splendide été / Je doute du soleil, je ne crois plus aux roses / Et je vais le front bas, comme un homme hanté // Et j'ai le cœur si plein d'automne & de veuvage / Que je rêve toujours, sous un ciel pur et clair – / D'une figure en deuil – dans un froid paysage / Et les feuilles tombant au premier vent d'hiver.'<sup>11</sup>

In terms of its coloration, this painting is far removed from Van Gogh's more tonal work of the Drenthe period (*cats. 3-5*). It bears witness to his recently acquired knowledge of the theory of complementary colours, drawn from Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin*.<sup>12</sup> Although he had described the autumn a few months earlier as a 'contrast of yellow leaves against violet tones'

<sup>1</sup> De la Faille 1928. The picture was mistakenly thought to be the work mentioned in letter 541/430, a study of poplars in yellow.

<sup>2</sup> M.E. Tralbaut, in Essen 1957, no. 176. For years, however, many exhibition catalogues continued to list the work under the old date; this changed only after the new, revised edition of De la Faille's catalogue raisonné appeared in 1970.

<sup>3</sup> Originally, it was F 45 JH 959, Van Gogh's Avenue of poplars from Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen in Rotterdam, which was connected with this quotation. That work, however, was the study of poplars mentioned in letter 541/430, from November 1885 (see fn. 1).

<sup>4</sup> It is no longer possible to determine which other works Van Gogh may have executed at that time. In a letter of c. 22 October 1884 he writes of a 'study of two pollard willows, with yellow

[454/372], what is striking in this work is the opposition of blue and orange – ‘the most wonderful gamut,’ as he later wrote [537/426]. At the time, he mainly associated these complementary colours with summer, but they were clearly also necessary to express the sunniness of a lovely autumn day.<sup>13</sup>

The painting has been carefully constructed. The artist used a transparent, brown-black underpaint for the trees at the right; the ones to the left are painted over a thin layer of green, covered with a reddish brown. The motif was then laid in with orange and green. This was followed by the tree trunks, the leaves and finally the sky (fig. 7b). The brushstrokes of the avenue end at the woman’s contours, indicating that she was painted before the ground on which she is walking. Initially, the farmhouse was denoted only by a



7a Woman with a mourning shawl  
(F 1195r JH 818), 1885. Otterlo,  
Kröller-Müller Museum.

*poplars behind it, and a view of the fields’*  
[468/382]. The first picture has been lost; the second is probably the autumn landscape in the Centraal Museum in Utrecht (F 121 JH 956), which – in contrast to the œuvre catalogues – Roland Dorn, in Vienna 1996, p. 168, correctly dated to October 1884.

5 This type of farmhouse is also depicted in a drawing from Etten (F 884 JH 57).

6 F 1239 JH 464 and F 1241 JH 470; F 1678 JH 46 is a variation, executed in Etten.

In addition, Van Gogh had actually seen Meindert Hobbema’s Avenue at Middelharnis (London, National Gallery), the most famous example of this genre. He even made special mention of it in a letter to Theo from August 1884, when the latter was in London and needed to know which masterpieces he should look at (letter 456/374).

7 He also used a half a tree as a repoussoir device in his woodland painting from The Hague: F 192 JH 184.

8 Van Gogh began to experiment with larger formats in June 1884 (see letter 453/371, in which he notes pictures measuring 105 × 95 cm and 100 × 75 cm). These were, however, exceptions, as were his large sketches for the decorative panels for the goldsmith Antoon Hermans (1822–1897).

9 On this type of mourning shawl see also cat. 20. The earliest reviews already indicate that her clothing had been identified and understood. In ‘Schilderkunst. Vincent van Gogh en Floris Verster in Rotterdam,’ De Kroniek (4 June 1907), H.F.W. Jeltes speaks of it as a picture of ‘passionate mourning,’ a statement that could only have been inspired by her dress.

10 Van Gogh probably considered mourning a quintessentially feminine vocation. His rather conservative opinions of the opposite sex were mostly drawn from his reading of Michelet’s L’amour, published in Paris in 1858 (see Sund 1992, pp. 42–43), which propagates exactly this notion. Michelet writes (p. 357) that it is man’s fate ‘de mourir, à la femme de pleurer. [...] La femme si maladive, de deuil en deuil, de larmes en larmes, vit cependant et reste veuve.’

11 Quoted in letter 435/R41; the connection to Coppée’s poem was first made by Maureen Trapeniers in Den Bosch 1987–88, p. 220.

Van Gogh probably quoted the poem from François Coppée, Poésies de François Coppée 1869–1874, Paris 1880, pp. 148–49. Even at an

*early age, the artist already had a weakness for mourning women. He was particularly fond, for example, of the chapter entitled ‘Les aspirations de l’automne’ in Michelet’s L’amour (cit. [note 10], pp. 339-48), which describes a woman in a garden in the autumn (letter 14/11a). On Van Gogh’s associations with this motif see Ronald de Leeuw, ‘George Henry Boughton and the “beautiful picture” in Van Gogh’s 1876 sermon,’ *Van Gogh Museum Journal* (1995), pp. 57-59.*

*12 See the introductory essay ‘Five parcels and three crates.’*

*13 See also letter 454/372.*

*14 For the provenance of the works shown at Oldenzeel’s see cat. 1. The original frame is now in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum and has a sticker from the gallery.*

*15 ‘Letteren en kunst. Oldenzeel,’ *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (27 November 1904).*

*16 Jeltes, op. cit. (note 9).*

*17 The picture was probably given this second support in 1902, as were most of the other works exhibited and sold at Oldenzeel’s; see cat. 2. Information on the sale was provided by*

*Mr A.S. Nolst-Tréité, letters of 9 November 1977 and 28 February 1997. In 1903, the couple bought a still life from the same gallery for f 750 (F 197 JH 1167).*

*18 The frame was replaced by a gold-coloured version with a twentieth-century profile in 1980-81; at that time the museum decided to replace all the – usually extremely simple – frames used for Van Gogh’s paintings; see Van Tilborgh 1995, pp. 179-80.*

*19 Letter of 7 September 1976 to V.W. Van Gogh.*

*20 Van Gogh 1976, pp. 57-59.*

single, dark line; only after the sky had been painted in was it given colour and shape. To the left, in the middle of the group of trees, between the leaves of the birches and the poplars, Van Gogh appears to have wiped away part of the image at the last minute. He then filled in the area in a sketchy manner, apparently undisturbed by the fact that the trunk of one of his poplars had been interrupted. The leaves of the poplars have been effectively suggested by blotting with the brush.

The painter Willem Wenckebach (1860-1937) praised the ‘avenue with autumn trees’ on a visit to Nuenen in August of 1885. Despite this unexpected compliment Van Gogh left the picture behind when he moved to Antwerp at the end of the year [528/415]. After much peregrination, it finally ended up at the Kunstuilen Oldenzeel in Rotterdam, where it was exhibited in 1904.<sup>14</sup> The critic for the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* commended Van Gogh’s ‘Shakespearean spirit,’ his ability to make everything ‘monumental, large’ – like the ‘bridge in the foreground, the supports and the [...] hole, the pit in the foreground.’<sup>15</sup>



7b Detail of cat. 7.

Later, the critic Jeltes was equally positive: ‘What power there is in that light of passionate mourning’ he wrote.<sup>16</sup>

The painting, which was probably laid on panel before being sold, was bought from the Rotterdam gallery in 1904 for f 1,000 by J.G.L. Nolst Trénité (1863-1941), a lawyer and member of the city council, and his wife E.C. Nolst Trénité-van Rossem (1862-1931), both of whom had followed H.P. Bremmer’s art courses.<sup>17</sup>

The picture – whose former brown-black frame with gold-coloured inlay has been preserved – remained in the family for many years. In 1976, however, the last heirs – who took turns safeguarding it – decided to sell.<sup>18</sup> They preferred to see it ‘remain in the Netherlands.’<sup>19</sup> A year later, *Avenue of poplars in autumn* was purchased by the Van Gogh Museum, with financial support of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the Vereniging Rembrandt.<sup>20</sup>



7c Cat. 7 with its c. 1904 frame.

## 8 Vase with honesty

AUTUMN-WINTER 1884-85

Oil on canvas

42.7 x 31.7 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 9 V/1963

F 76 JH 54<sup>2</sup>

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 18 x 14 (thin) threads, open weave, original edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: narrow and medium. Varnished. Details: weave imprints.

#### PROVENANCE

March 1885-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-? V.W. van Gogh; ?-1963 Theo van Gogh Foundation; 1963 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1931-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LETTER

493/398.

#### LITERATURE

Hulsker 1980, pp. 126, 128, 130, 158; De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 31, vol. 2, pl. xx; Vanbeseelaere 1937, pp. 295, 335, 346-47, 349, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 85, no. 81; Tralbaut 1955, pp. 16, 19, 35; De la Faille 1970, pp. 67, 614; Amsterdam 1987, p. 316, no. 1.61; Hulsker 1989, pp. 126, 128, 158; Hulsker 1996, pp. 126, 134, 160.

In contrast to his Paris years, Van Gogh painted hardly any flower still lifes during the Nuenen period. In addition to *Vase with honesty* – one of the first ‘flower’ paintings in his œuvre – only two other still lifes with bouquets are known.<sup>1</sup> One of these, *Still life with autumn leaves* (fig. 8a), is quite similar to *Vase with honesty* in terms of style, coloration and motif, and was therefore probably painted during the same months.<sup>2</sup> The other, *Still life with asters*, (fig. 8b) has been dated to both Nuenen and Paris,<sup>3</sup> but the provenance and the beer tankard holding the flowers – the same one we find in *Beer tankards* (cat. 37) – indicate that it was painted in Nuenen.<sup>4</sup> The decidedly autumnal character of all these works can perhaps be explained by Van Gogh’s love of this particular season.<sup>5</sup>



8a *Still life with autumn leaves* (F 200 JH 541), 1884. Present whereabouts unknown.

It is not known exactly when Van Gogh painted *Vase with honesty*. The combination of honesty and a branch of withered oak leaves points to fall or winter. The picture is typical of the time in 1884-85 when Van Gogh was busy painting still lifes with his pupils from Eindhoven (see cat. 9). Thanks to a letter, we do know that the canvas was finished – and even dry enough to travel – by the end of March 1885, as Theo appears to have taken it with him back to Paris following the funeral of their father, who had died suddenly on the 26th. Vincent sent him a number of sketches, noting: ‘Here another little rough sketch of a man’s head and one of a still life with honesty, like the one you took with you’ [493/398]. A letter of a few days earlier, which mentions not only paintings of heads but also the *Vase with honesty*, tells us how Theo had actually transported the pictures, with Vincent asking if the ‘rolled up things’ had arrived safely [492/397].<sup>6</sup>

The *Vase with honesty* is quite thickly painted, mostly executed wet-into-wet. Van Gogh first set out the general lines of the composition – which was probably painted in one sitting – and then added the background. He subsequently modelled his motif, painting in the light and dark areas and applying colour. He thus created a contrast between the yellow-brown leaves and the blue background. It is not clear whether this blue area is meant to represent a vase or a piece of cloth. Nor do the dark background and the cream-coloured foreground have any clear structure; they are rather sloppily painted, as in many of Van Gogh’s still lifes. He may have left these areas unfinished on purpose, as this allows the central objects to stand out more distinctly. By comparison, the play of light on the silvery honesty – which was probably what attracted Van Gogh to the motif in the first place – is far more carefully depicted. The actual form of the yellow flowers in the bouquet is remarkably vague, achieved by drawing a dry brush over the nearly dry paint. It is conceivable that they were originally painted them in more detail, and that the artist later deciding that they had become too dominant. By almost literally abstracting them he thus placed more emphasis on the honesty itself.

Here, Van Gogh mixed copaiba balsam into his paint.<sup>7</sup> Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, artists had used this viscous oleoresin to enrich their paint, to help it remain shiny after drying and to give colours more depth.<sup>8</sup> One drawback,

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 17 [not for sale]; 1926 Dresden, no. 216 [not for sale]; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 19; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 7; 1949 Middelburg, no. 2; 1950 Hilversum, no. 8; 1952 Enschede, no. 1; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 4; 1953 Zundert, no. 4; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 17; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 4; 1953 Assen, no. 4; 1954 Zürich, no. 8; 1954-55 Willemstad, no. 3; 1955 Palm Beach, Miami & New Orleans, no. 3; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 56; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 27; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 2; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 12; 1968-69 London, no. 36; 1998-99 Amsterdam, no catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> For the sake of simplicity we have used the term ‘flower still life’ throughout, although technically speaking this work does not depict flowers at all. Honesty is a cruciferous plant whose dried pods are used for decoration.

<sup>2</sup> According to family tradition, Theo brought the cloisonné vase which contains the branches of autumn leaves with him from Paris to Nuenen; see V.W. van Gogh’s memorandum, 6 May 1971. The vase is now in the museum’s collection (inv. v 41 V/1978).

<sup>3</sup> F 197 JH 1167. For a overview of the dating see Peter C. Sutton, Northern European paintings in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. From the sixteenth through the nineteenth century, Philadelphia 1990, no. 32, pp. 90-91. Sutton dates the painting to 1886.

<sup>4</sup> The painting was among those left with his mother when Van Gogh departed Nuenen for Antwerp. For the fate of these works see cat. 1.

<sup>5</sup> On the role of the seasons in Van Gogh’s œuvre see Tokyo 1997, pp. 127-32.

<sup>6</sup> For these heads see cats. 10-18.

<sup>7</sup> Its presence was confirmed by paint analysis; see the report of Inez van der Werf, September 1997.

<sup>8</sup> On copaiba balsam see Hummelen/Peres 1993, pp. 63-64.

<sup>9</sup> Analysis of this paint revealed no copaiba balsam. This does not mean, however, that it was not used; since its chemical composition changes over time, it may simply no longer be detectable.

<sup>10</sup> See J.C. Traas's bill to V.W. van Gogh, December 1929 (inv. b 4218 V/1962): 'Vase with honesty – cardboard removed, relined, cleaned, retouched and varnished 25..'

<sup>11</sup> If the canvas had later been cropped – for example during the relining – then the cut would have gone through the paint. These cut edges are usually quite taught, which is not the case here.

<sup>12</sup> Letter 493/398.

<sup>13</sup> See Van Heugten 1995, p. 73. Basket with apples (cat. 33) measures 45 × 60 cm. Only five months after painting his flower still life, Van Gogh reused the canvas for this still life with apples. He may have been dissatisfied with the composition as sketched in the letter, initially merely adding several flowers to the left of the vase. Apparently he did not feel this was an improvement and so chose not to work on the canvas further.

<sup>14</sup> These bright colours – light blue, green, grey-blue, pink, orange and yellow – can be seen under the microscope, at the edges of the still life with apples; see cat. 33.

<sup>15</sup> Greer 1997, pp. 34–35. The judaspennings represents to the 30 pieces of silver Judas received for betraying Jesus.

<sup>16</sup> Van Heugten 1995, p. 73.

however, is that it dries inadequately and is highly sensitive to warmth. This meant that when the picture was relined – using heat – the balsam became soft, and the fluid paint rose through the cracks to the surface. The balsam may also have caused the 'drips' in the upper half of the canvas.<sup>9</sup>

The canvas was once laid on cardboard. This support was removed by the restorer J.C. Traas in 1929, and the painting relined.<sup>10</sup> That the support was actually cardboard is confirmed by the traces of a crease in the paint layer and the absence of tacking edges. Since the paint extends completely to the edges and the canvas has not been cropped we may assume this picture never had any.<sup>11</sup>

In his first letter following Theo's return to Paris, Vincent announced: 'I want to start in on a new still life of honesty and withered leaves against blue, because he also said something about that' [492/397]. The reference here is to their uncle, the art dealer C.M. van Gogh (1824–1908). He had visited Vincent's studio while in Nuenen for his brother's funeral on 30 March, and had praised the *Vase with honesty*. Van Gogh was probably hoping to produce some more saleable work with this motif. He painted the second still life in memory of his father, writing that the new picture was somewhat larger than the first and that 'the objects in the foreground [...] [are] a tobacco pouch and a pipe that belonged to Pa.'



8b Still life with asters, 1885 (F 1097)

JH 1167) Philadelphia, Philadelphia  
Museum of Art.



8 Vase with honesty

adding ‘if you want to have it, you certainly can’ [493/398]. This work was once believed to have been lost, and was known only from the sketch Vincent included in his letter to Theo (fig. 8c).<sup>12</sup> Its actual fate is revealed by the x-ray of *Basket with apples* (cat. 33), which has clearly been painted over the earlier still life (fig. 30i).<sup>13</sup> Not only was this second version different in format, it was also painted in much brighter colours than the rather sombre work that has survived.<sup>14</sup>

Although Van Gogh never said anything about the symbolism in these two still lifes, various attempts have been made to discover a deeper meaning in the overpainted work. It has been said that Van Gogh intended the plant – called a *judaspenning* in Dutch – to express his feeling of having been



8c Sketch in a letter to Theo of April  
1885 (493/398). Amsterdam, Van Gogh  
Museum.

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betrayed by his father.<sup>15</sup> In 1880, Father Van Gogh had wanted to have his son institutionalised, and this had caused irreparable damage to their relationship. Van Gogh is supposed to have ‘erased’ the picture out of guilt about the animosity he felt towards his deceased father. It has also been suggested that he found the flowers next to the vase – a symbol of mortality – simply too inauspicious.<sup>16</sup> It is unclear whether Van Gogh was actually familiar with flower symbolism, although – given its name – such knowledge was not necessary to connect the judaspennig and treachery. It does, however, seem unlikely that he would make a direct reference in 1885 to an event of five years earlier, particularly given the fact that his relationship with his father had remained problematic during the time in between. Moreover, the correspondence indicates that Van Gogh did not feel so much betrayed as misunderstood. The second still life was undoubtedly painted in memory of his father, but whether the choice and arrangement of the flowers has any further significance is far from certain. The honesty, with its serene, sober appearance, was perhaps simply appropriate to the character Van Gogh wished to impart to his still life.

*Vase with honesty*, together with *The potato eaters*, was the only painting from Van Gogh’s Dutch period Johanna van Gogh-Bonger hung in her home (see fig.6 on p. 15). Their personal value to her may be indicated by the fact that they were the only works painted in Holland not for sale at exhibitions.

## 9 Still life with bottles and earthenware

NOVEMBER 1884-  
APRIL 1885

Oil on canvas  
31.5 × 41.7 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 60 V/1962  
F 61r JH 533

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas 14 × 18 (thin) threads, open weave, original edges, not relined, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to very wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, greyish pink paint on the edges, nail holes.

Painting on the verso (fig. 9a)

PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, pp. 27-28, vol. 2, pl. xvii; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 285, 330, 346-47, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 74, no. 66; Tralbaut 1955, pp. 6, 35; De la Faille 1970, pp. 63, 614; Amsterdam 1987, p. 317,

Three years had passed between the first still lifes Van Gogh painted in December 1881 under the direction of Anton Mauve (*cat. 1*) and the second series begun in November 1884, to which this *Still life with bottles and earthenware* belongs. Mauve had sought to teach him something of the genre – form, composition, the reproduction of texture and colour – but in the period that followed Vincent had concentrated on his real passion: the human figure. It is telling that he returned to still life painting just at the moment when he himself became a teacher: ‘I now have three fellows in Eindhoven who want to learn how to paint, and whom I’m teaching to do still lifes,’ he wrote to Theo in November 1884 [471/385]. His three pupils were the goldsmith Toon Hermans (1822-1897), the tanner Anton Kerssemakers (1846-1924) and the telegrapher Willem van de Wakker (1859-1927).<sup>1</sup> According to Van de Wakker, Van Gogh saw ‘still life painting [...] [as] the root of everything. If you can paint a still life, you can paint a forest!’ – considering Van Gogh’s personal artistic development a somewhat paradoxical opinion.<sup>2</sup>

According to Van Gogh, still life painting was useful because it taught the artist composition and proportion. He advised Kerssemakers to ‘do a few still lifes instead of landscape[s], they’ll teach you a lot more; once you’ve done about 50 of them you’ll begin to see the progress you’ve made, and I’m ready to help you and to work with you on the same subject; I still have a lot to learn, and there’s no better way to learn how to put objects in their proper place and to distinguish them from one another.’<sup>3</sup> And, indeed, he kept his promise, writing to Theo in mid-November 1884 that the week before he had ‘painted still lifes day in and day out with the fellows in Eindhoven’ [473/387].

An effective technique for suggesting volume is *chiaroscuro*, particularly the treatment of the shadows. In a letter to Kerssemakers from mid-January 1885, Van Gogh stressed its importance. He suggested they spend another few days painting together ‘because the question of clair obscur and colour and



9 Still life with bottles and earthenware

no. 1.65; Hulsker 1996,  
pp. 124-25, 132.

## EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 23 [Dfl.  
400]; 1924 Amsterdam,  
no. 8; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 5;  
1929 Utrecht, no. 2 [not for  
sale]; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 4;  
1932 Manchester, no. 1; 1947  
Groningen, no. 4; 1948-49  
The Hague, no. 5; 1998-99  
Amsterdam, no catalogue.

deep of tone in the shadowed parts is an eternally difficult one'  
[481/1]. It is thus rather curious that although he managed to get  
the tone of the shaded areas right in his own still life, he seems  
to have paid little attention to the direction of the shadows in  
relation to the light source – a not unimportant element in  
achieving the effect of weight and mass.

In the same letter, Van Gogh also wrote of the significance of  
colour theory in mastering *chiaroscuro* in addition to painting a lot  
oneself and watching others. He had begun studying the laws of  
colour in May-June 1884, when he first read Charles Blanc's  
*Les artistes de mon temps*. Van Gogh sought to conquer not only the  
rendering of *chiaroscuro*, but also the laws of colours and tonal  
painting.<sup>4</sup> These issues were also central to the still lifes he painted  
beginning in November 1884, both individually and in combination.  
This amalgamation of colour and *chiaroscuro* is most obvious in the  
shadows: while the artist initially used black for the dark areas, after  
reading Blanc he turned to such deep colours as dark blue, dark  
green and dark brown.

For Blanc – and thus for Van Gogh – a successful combination  
of tone and colour lay in the use of what he called 'ton rompu.'<sup>5</sup>  
'Broken colour' are achieved by mixing unequal amounts of two  
complementary colours. Combining equal parts lead to a neutral  
grey; the other method, however, produces a *coloured* grey that takes  
on the shade that had been added in larger quantities. An unequal  
mix of the complementary colours red and green, for example, can  
lead to either a reddish or a greenish grey. The result weakens the  
contrasting effect. If, on the other hand, pure colours are placed  
side by side, they strengthen each other, creating a so-called comple-  
mentary contrast.

Several of these effects can be seen in *Still life with bottles  
and earthenware*. Van Gogh painted the darker elements in various  
colours: the bottles to the left and right are dark blue, the one in  
the middle dark green and the one in the background to the right  
a dark brown. The red label on the central bottle stands out  
vividly, due to the contrast with the green. We see the same prin-  
ciple at work on the right, in the turquoise edging on the box,  
which contrasts with the brownish red of the object itself.

It is not possible to determine the exact date of *Still life with  
bottles and earthenware*. Initially, all the still lifes with bottles and  
pottery painted in Nuenen were assigned to November 1884.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh later also taught the draughtsman Dimmen Gestel (1862-1945); see Gestel's letter to A. Plasschaert, 16 August 1912 (inv. b 3039 V/1983).

<sup>2</sup> Stokvis 1927, p. 14.

<sup>3</sup> Kerssemakers 1912, 1.

<sup>4</sup> See Hummelen/Peres 1993, p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> Charles Blanc, *Les artistes de mon temps*, Paris 1876, pp. 64-66. Van Gogh copied this passage into letter 497/401. Blanc had adopted his ideas from the physicist Michel Eugène Chevreul (1786-1889), who published the theory in *De la loi du contraste simultané des couleurs*, Paris 1839.

<sup>6</sup> In 1928 De la Faille was the first to identify the 16 still lifes with bottles and earthenware as a group (F 49-64) and to date them to November 1884. The JH numbers are: 534; 529; 925; 535; 538; 536; 532; 530; 539; 531; 921; 540; 533; 922; 920; and 537, respectively.

<sup>7</sup> See letters 471/385, 473/387, 481/-, 492/397 and 493/398.

<sup>8</sup> Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 284-86.

<sup>9</sup> He correctly added two works (F 178r JH 528 and F 202 JH 738) and dated two others, somewhat later again correctly, (cat. 35 and F 59 JH 921).

<sup>10</sup> The two pictures Van Gogh painted in The Hague are F 62 JH 922 and F 63 JH 920. At least six works, cats. 35-37, and F 50 JH 529, F 56 JH 530 and F 57 JH 539 can be redated to the summer of 1885, thanks to the discovery of underlying images; see Van Heugten 1995, pp. 62-85. In terms of style, format and objects depicted, F 59 JH 921 is quite similar to cat. 35.

This was based solely on the letter, mentioned above, in which the artist told his brother that he had been painting still lifes for a whole week. He even elaborated on the subject: 'Hermans has so many lovely things – such as old jugs and other antiques – that I wondered if I could oblige you with a still life of some of them – for example, of the Gothic pieces – for your room.

The things I've been doing with Hermans up to now are much simpler. But he just said to me today that if I wanted to paint a picture of some of the objects that are still too difficult for him, I could take them back to my studio. Please let me know what you think – if you would like that and then I'll choose some really nice things. By the way, I've already completed something small' [473/387]. This passage is so general, however, that it cannot be connected to any one picture with certainty. Moreover, it seems odd to assume that Van Gogh, who struggled with issues of colour and proportion over a long period of time, should have painted still lifes only during this particular month. Although he is less than specific in his letters, we can presume that he painted still lifes later as well – particularly given the fact that he also continued to work regularly with his pupils.<sup>7</sup>

Most of the still lifes, among them *Still life with bottles and earthenware*, are therefore now fixed to a much broader time span, namely November 1884 to April 1885, as Walther Vanbeselaere already proposed in 1937.<sup>8</sup> April 1885 is regarded as the end of the series because from that point on the painter began to concentrate on *The potato eaters*. Vanbeselaere made several changes to the group proposed by De la Faille in 1928, and suggested an order for the works painted within this period.<sup>9</sup> His suggestions have since

and should thus also date to September 1885.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to the picture here under discussion, the series includes F 52 JH 535; F 54 JH 536; F 55 JH 532; F 58 JH 531; F 60 JH 540; F 64 JH 537; F 178r JH 528; and F 202 JH 738. The latter, a kettle with two cups, is a study for *The potato eaters*, and is therefore dated to April 1885.

<sup>12</sup> These are F 52 JH 535; F 58 JH 531; F 64 JH 537; and F 178r JH 528. The flask may have belonged to Van Gogh himself. According to Kerssemakers 1912, he took it with him – filled with cognac – on his painting expeditions. Judging by the catalogue of the auction at which Herman's possessions were sold, it seems quite possible that the objects mentioned in the text belonged to him. Among the pieces for sale were a baardmankruik (a jug with the head of a bearded man under the lip), inkstands, various tobacco jars and 'several pretty seashells.'

*The auction was held in the Groote Zaal of the R.K. Volksbond (Roman Catholic Union) in Eindhoven, from 18-20 December 1907.*

*The auction catalogue is preserved in the library of the regional archive of Eindhoven/Kempenland (90/884).*

<sup>13</sup> We also find the ink bottle with the red label in F 64 JH 537; the painting with the pot and brushes is F 60 JH 540.

<sup>14</sup> In his 1928 catalogue raisonné *De la Faille* described it as a tin measuring cup.

<sup>15</sup> Johanna van Gogh-Bonger first proposed this in her list of works for Amsterdam 1905 (inv. b 5422 V/1996).

<sup>16</sup> See exhib. cat. Das Mostertpöttchen.

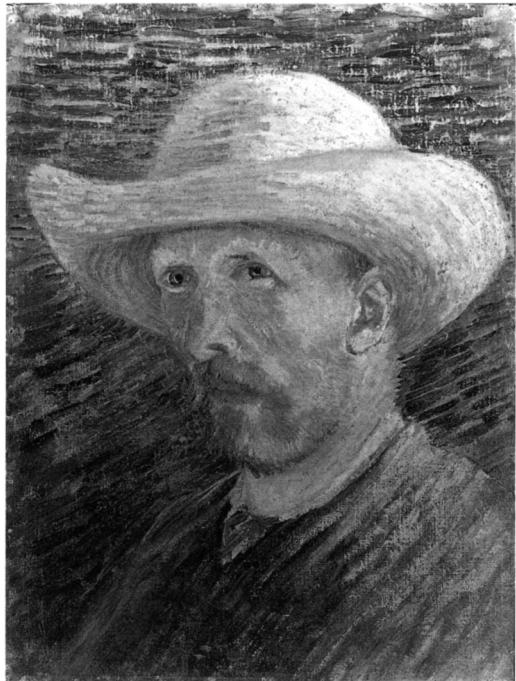
Senfgefässe, Düsseldorf (Stadtmuseum) 1986.

<sup>17</sup> See letter from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh, 9 December 1929 (inv. b 4217 V/1962).

<sup>18</sup> A bill from Traas reveals that he treated the painting in 1930: 'cleaned, retouched and framed' (inv. b 4207 V/1962).



9a Detail of lower edge of cat. 9.



9<sup>b</sup> *Self-portrait* (F 61v JH 1302);  
verso of cat. 9.

been partially superseded: some of the pictures were actually painted much earlier, in The Hague (*cat. 1*), others later, in the summer of 1885. In most cases the new dating of the latter group was based on the images found under today's paint layers, which exclude an earlier dating.<sup>10</sup>

The total number of still lifes attributed to the period November 1884 – April 1885 is nine.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to say which of them were painted together with Hermans. The 'lovely things – such as old jugs and other antiques' mentioned in the letter, and the description of some of the objects as 'Gothic' might be associated with four paintings depicting such objects as a *baardmankruik*, an inkstand, a tobacco jar, a coffee mill, a canteen and a large shell.<sup>12</sup> These works also exhibit various stylistic similarities.

In the other still lifes, which place more emphasis on colour contrasts, the objects are somewhat more commonplace: white cups, jugs for gin, green bottles, earthenware bowls and a Cologne pot. These were probably part of Van Gogh's prop collection, or are things he saw at the homes of the Nuenen poor. The still lifes also include objects the artist himself might have used when drawing or painting, such as a pot with brushes or the dark-green ink bottle with a red label in *Still life with bottles and earthenware*.<sup>13</sup>

This still life also includes a flat bottle with a large cork, a bottle with a white label and a red ceramic pitcher with, in front of it, an irregularly shaped little pot, which may have been used for holding lard.<sup>14</sup> It has been suggested that the box in the background is a cigar-box.<sup>15</sup> The jar next to the pitcher is a mustard jar, as can be gleaned from the initials – ABB – painted on the front: these stand for Adam Bernhard Bergrath, owner of a mustard manufactory founded in Düsseldorf in 1726. The anchor crossing the first B is borrowed from the city's coat of arms.<sup>16</sup> To the left behind the carefully arranged objects lies a brown cloth. This cloth, which is slightly lighter in colour than the background on the right, is painted over a darker underlayer and follows the contours of the two bottles to the left. Van Gogh probably painted it this way to increase the contrast between the bottles and the background.

In comparison to the background and the table, the objects themselves are rather thickly painted. Although in the former the

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paint has been brought on fairly thinly, here, too, the brushwork is visible. The reflections were added during the same sitting, painted into the still-wet darker paint, so that the colours have mixed slightly. The blue on the mustard jar was also done wet-into-wet, using a frayed brush. It seems likely that Van Gogh first laid in the entire composition with thin paint; in several places where the top layer is missing, namely, the ground itself is plainly visible, coated with this transparent layer.

We find traces of grey-pink and light blue paint along the edges of the still life. These derive from the ground and paint layer on the back of the canvas, which Van Gogh reused in Paris for a self-portrait (*fig. 9b*). This second picture was revealed in 1929, when the restorer J.C. Traas removed the cardboard.<sup>17</sup> It may also have been Traas who sought to mitigate the obvious, fragments of paint in the still life by retouching the surface.<sup>18</sup>

The edges of the canvas, which has many nail holes, have been irregularly cropped (*fig. 9a*). Before Van Gogh began to paint, he probably nailed it to some kind of support. He did this before commencing his work, as indicated by the fact that we find no paint directly around the holes.

## 10-18 Studies of heads

<sup>1</sup> He wrote in 1883: 'During the winter I plan to paint the same kinds of studies of heads as in the drawings I've already sent you. I would start right away, but it's more important to do the figures working in the fields while the harvest is still on' [373/308].

<sup>2</sup> He began with 'a large bust of a shepherd' [469/383], which, strictly speaking, cannot be considered a study of a head. This work has been connected with the underlying image in cat. 35, but whether they are really related is uncertain; see cat. 35.

<sup>3</sup> See letters 470/384, 472/386 and 477/389.

<sup>4</sup> Painted studies of heads are mentioned for the last time in letter 509/410. The number 47 refers to heads only; paintings of half-length figures, such as cat. 19, are not included. The total was probably originally more than 47, but some of the works have either been lost or overpainted; see cat. 37.

<sup>5</sup> On the fate of these pictures see the introductory essay 'Five parcels and three crates.'

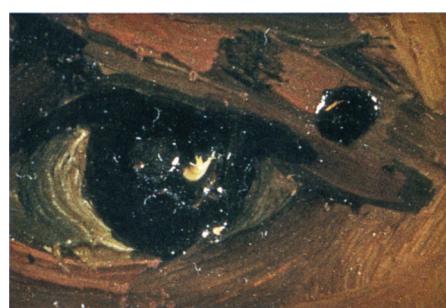
<sup>6</sup> Gordina de Groot is mentioned in letter 532/423, and referred to as 'Sien de Groot' in letter 576/W1. Number 12 was not used as a study for *The potato eaters*, however, as it was already with Theo in Paris. See the text.

<sup>7</sup> An exception should perhaps be made for the study of the model with the red cap (cat. 13). Although she seems coarser and has a much longer face than Gordina de Groot in cat. 12, they could, nonetheless, be the same. Theo probably took this picture, along with cat. 12, back with him to Paris at the end of March; it would then be one of those Vincent had announced earlier in the month: 'an old and a young woman, and probably even more than one of

Van Gogh painted numerous studies of heads during his sojourn in Nuenen. He saw these works as vital preparation for his career as a figure painter, a genre he hoped to study one day at the art academy. Although his plan to carry out these exercises dated back to May 1883,<sup>1</sup> when he was living in The Hague, he only began them in earnest at the end of October 1884. He had recently been joined by Anthon van Rappard, who made 'various studies of heads' [469/383] during his Brabant visit. Van Rappard stressed the importance of these studies, and Van Gogh decided that he, too, would paint at least 30. 'Over the summer Van Rappard had done the same in Drenthe and on [the island of] Terschelling, and he made great progress' [469/383].

The first head was painted during Van Rappard's visit, at the end of October 1884,<sup>2</sup> and by the end of February Van Gogh had reached his original goal [487/394]. In the meantime, however, he had decided to increase the number to 50, and thus continued the project through the rest of the winter and early spring.<sup>3</sup> 47 paintings in total have survived, the last dating from the end of May 1885.<sup>4</sup> Around a third of these – at least 17 – were sent to Theo.<sup>5</sup> Of these, ten are now in the Van Gogh Museum: numbers 10-18 and a study of a woman at a window (cat. 22).

Van Gogh wrote practically nothing about his models in his letters. Only once did he mention the name of a woman who had sat



10<sup>a</sup> Detail of cat. 10.



10 Head of a woman

*these two models' [488/395]. If Van Gogh did indeed carry out his plan, then the portraits of the young women Theo took to France (cats. 12 and 13) were indeed of the same model. Since the woman in cat. 12 is certainly Gordina de Groot, she would then also be depicted in cat. 13 – even if this seems highly improbable.*

8 F 1145 JH 581, F 1146 JH 580 and

F 1147 JH 578.

9 See Van Tilborgh 1993, pp. 15–19.

10 Van Gogh subscribed to traditional theories of physiognomic stereotypes; his ideas derived from a book he had read containing a summary of the work of Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) and Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801).

According to them, flat faces with low foreheads indicated 'stupidity related to stubbornness and a lack of sensitivity,' while thick lips were a sign of 'coarseness and an element of cunning' (A. Ysabeau, Lavater et Gall. *Physiognomonie et phrénologie rendues intelligibles pour tout le monde*, Paris n.d., pp. 71, 59); see also fn. 9.

11 Van Breugel 1975, pp. 32, 43 and 44, and Miep de Haard, 'Brabantse kleding in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. Deel 1. Mutsen en poffers,' *De Drijehornickels* (September 1996), p. 42.

12 Van Breugel 1975, p. 43.

13 Letter from J. Spoorenberg, 5 October 1998.

14 See Miep de Haard, 'Brabantse kleding in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw. Deel 2. Onder-en bovenkleding van vrouwen,' *De Drijehornickels* (May 1997), p. 13.

15 In a letter of 8 December 1998, Jack van Hoek pointed out his resemblance to Johannes Schafrat, curate of the Catholic congregation and Van Gogh's landlord. A photograph of him as an old man is reproduced in *De Brouwer* 1984, p. 38. There is a certain resemblance to the portrait, but since the photograph does not show him in profile no real conclusions can be drawn. In addition, Schafrat's wife claimed in the 1920s that Van Gogh had 'never painted anyone in the [...] family'; see Stokvis 1926, p. 29.

16 This is not to say that Van Gogh did not use a grid, though. Infrared reflectography can penetrate thick layers of paint only with difficulty. Remarkably, however, nothing was found in the thinner layers either.

17 To the left is a fragment of this piece.

This indicates that it was moved either during execution or shortly thereafter.

18 For Van Gogh's use of copiaba balsam see

for him: Gordina de Groot (1855–1927). She can be identified from *The potato eaters* (cat. 26), which is said to depict the De Groot-Van Rooij family, and is probably the woman at the left. She is also the subject of one of the studies (cat. 12).<sup>6</sup> Although the women in three other studies bear some resemblance to her (cats. 13, 15 and 16) there are also numerous differences; one cannot, therefore, be certain they are actually the same person.<sup>7</sup> There are two studies of the same old woman (cats. 14 and 18). The peasant with a pipe (cat. 11) looks something like a model found in three of Van Gogh's drawings.<sup>8</sup> The woman in number 10 does not appear again; nor does the man with a moustache (cat. 17).

Van Gogh saw his studies not so much as portraits of individuals but as illustrations of types. He sought to depict his models as the very incarnation of primitive rural life. He chose roughened, harsh faces, giving them animal-like expressions in order to emphasise the peasants' inextricable link to the cycles of nature.<sup>9</sup>

He preferred men and women with 'coarse, flat faces with low foreheads and thick lips, not sharp, but full and Millet-like' [454/372].<sup>10</sup> And, indeed, the majority of the models have thick lips; however, only the old woman in numbers 14 and 18 fulfills all the artist's criteria. She is certainly among the figures Van Gogh described as 'through and through of the ancient Brabant race' [532/423].

The models' head coverings are fairly simple. One woman has a red morning-cap, worn in and around the house (cat. 13). Outside, the most common form of women's headgear was the white day-cap, which we find in four of the studies (cats. 10, 12, 14 and 18).<sup>11</sup> Two of the women depicted wear an under-cap (cats. 15 and 16), which was designed to protect the white headdress placed over it but was also worn alone. Beneath, the hair was parted in the middle and pinned behind the ears.<sup>12</sup> The cap worn by the moustached man (cat. 17) is a so-called *Zeeuwse bolhoed* ('Zeeland bowler'), which had become fashionable around 1860.<sup>13</sup>

The peasants' clothing is as plain as their headgear. The women in numbers 10, 13, 15 and 16 wear everyday blue blouses. The model in number 12 has a shawl, as does the one in number 14. The dress of the old woman in number 18 is slightly more refined: she has donned a kind of narrow cape known as a pelerine, worn only on Sundays and holidays.<sup>14</sup> The man in number 17, like the one in number 11, is dressed in a smock, with his shirt visible underneath. Although he looks somewhat

less coarse than the others, he, too, must have been a farm labourer or weaver.<sup>15</sup>

From an artistic point of view, Van Gogh was most interested in the white headdresses: ‘it’s difficult, but so eternally beautiful – especially the clair obscur – the white and then a portion of the face in shadow has such a fine tone’ [481/–]. Although the caps appear to be pure white, they are in fact painted in broken colours, their brilliance expressed ‘by opposition with dark’ [453/371]. In all the studies the folded edge at the front is reproduced using parallel brushstrokes. Only in number 14 is it suggested by drawing lines with a dry brush into the wet paint (fig. 10a). In some cases the embroidery has been indicated with round and almost square daubs of colour (*cats.* 12 and 18).

Most of the heads are studies in tone. Only number 13 is clearly an exercise in colour, whereby the artist focused on the complementary contrast of red and green. They were also a means of practising brushwork. In some the technique is careful and controlled (*cats.* 10 and 12), in others looser (*cats.* 12, 15 and 17), and in one case – the portrait of the old woman – positively direct and bold (*cat.* 18). This last painting was the result of Van Gogh’s striving for an increasingly expressive touch, designed to emphasise the brutishness of his models.

Van Gogh advised his friend Anton Kerssemakers to use a perspective frame for ‘painting and drawing heads.’ We may therefore conclude that he himself employed it for his own studies [517/–]. However, there are no traces of a grid in any of the works discussed here, not even when viewed using infrared reflectography (*cat.* 12).<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, there appear to be no underdrawings, except in the case of the portrait of the man with a pipe (*cat.* 11); here the microscope revealed a few fine lines under his left eye.

The majority of the works were painted wet-into-wet. Only the woman with the red cap (*cat.* 13) seems to have been executed in more than one sitting. Her collar was originally pink and green, but was later changed to white and red. Van Gogh used rather dry paint for these alterations, as he did for the light green folds of her blouse. The red in the cap, too, was applied later; the artist then modified the mud-coloured background around her head and painted in the hair.

Some of the works have been corrected in other ways, too. The background of the smoking man (*cat.* 11), for example, was once

*cats.* 8 and 26 and Hummelen/Peres 1993, pp. 55–57. Only the portrait of the woman with a red cap (*cat.* 13) was examined for traces of copaiba balsam, but none was found. See the report of Inez van der Werf, September 1997 and also *cat.* 8, fn. 9.

<sup>19</sup> On the dating of the sketches see Drawings 11, nos. 108–18, pp. 124–33.

<sup>20</sup> The only other signed study of a head is F 141 JH 783. There was one additional painting in Theo’s collection that could be connected to the left-hand portrait in the letter sketch: F 85 JH 693. This work, however, was only sent at the beginning of May (see letters 503/406 and 504/407). In letter 506/409 Van Gogh calls it ‘the largest’ in the most recent shipment.

(It could also be the same as F 141 JH 783, but, in contrast to this work, ‘smoothly painted.’) Van Gogh was not referring to the size of the canvas but rather to the size of the head itself, which is indeed rather large.

<sup>21</sup> Hulsker 1993, p. 48 and Essen 1990, p. 70. Hulsker 1973, p. 100, mentions *cat.* 13 as well as *cat.* 15.

<sup>22</sup> The only portrait in Theo’s collection which appears to be of a young model is *cat.* 15, but it is not painted in contrasting shades of green and red.

<sup>23</sup> In any case, in a letter from the middle of May, prior to his second shipment, Van Gogh wrote ‘I now have seven heads finished [...], so I could send you a small shipment’ [506/409]. See also letter 505/408, which mentions ‘six heads.’

<sup>24</sup> F 141 JH 783, described in letter 506/409.

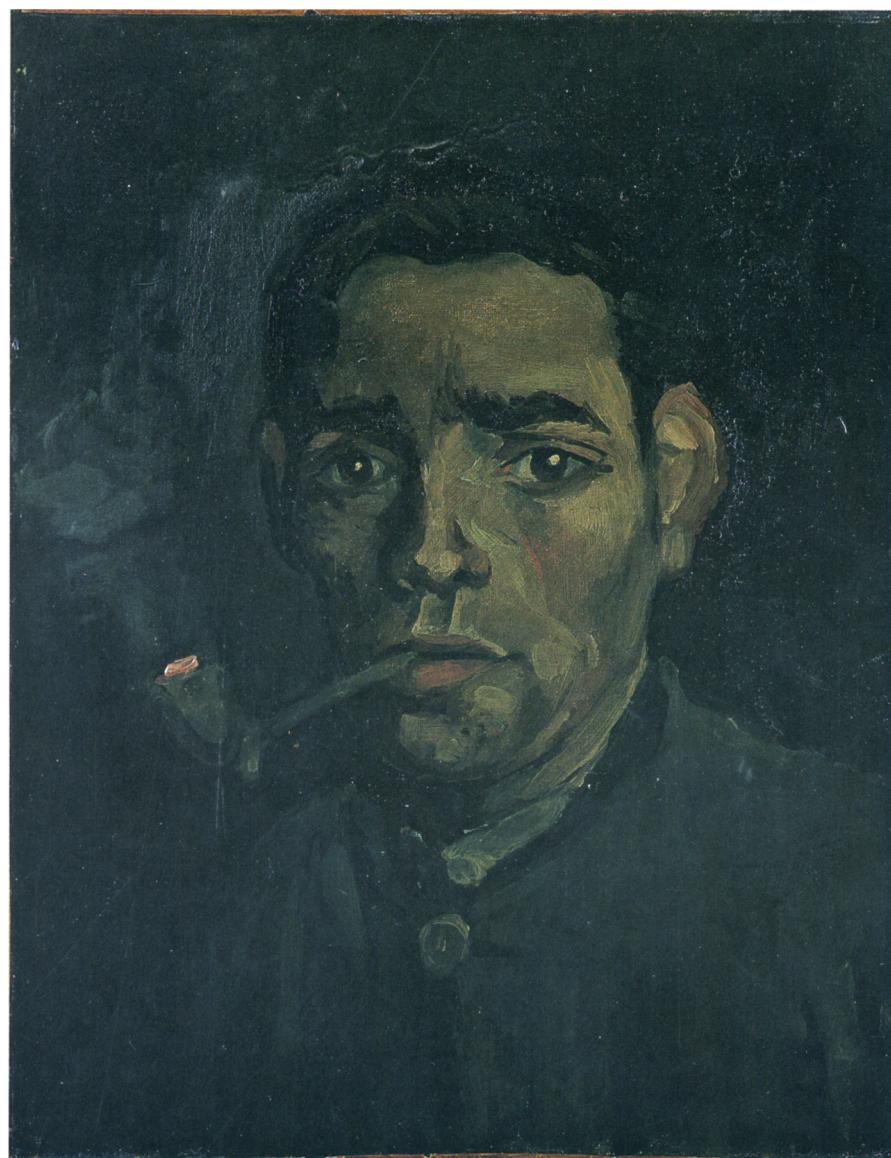
<sup>25</sup> See also *cats.* 9, 25 and 38.

<sup>26</sup> On the verso of *cat.* 17 we find the word ‘vervalt’ (cancelled). The same notation is found on the back of *cat.* 25; see *cat.* 25.

<sup>27</sup> The paint layer of *cat.* 15 also exhibits paint fragments, but none of them are grey-pink. This work only shows paint from the upper parts of the impasto on the painted verso of the Nuenen work, or it was stacked against a picture in the studio which does not belong to this series.

<sup>28</sup> See fn. 29 and De la Faille 1928.

<sup>29</sup> See J.C. Traas’s bill for his restoration in work in 1929, in which he mentions a ‘woman with a white cap’; given the initial descriptions of the supports of the other portraits with white caps in the collection, this can only be identified as *cat.* 10: ‘Cardboard removed, relined, cleaned, retouched where necessary and varnished and furnished, all with a new stretcher’



11 Head of a man



12 Head of a woman

(inv. b 4208 V/1962). Cat. 15 is described as 'Girl with a blue cap' and underwent the same treatment as cat. 11. Cats. 17 and 18 were restored in 1929: 'new stretcher, cleaned and varnished' (inv. b 4208 V/1962); cat. 13 was relined in 1930 (inv. b 4207 V/1962). There are several bills related the restoration of these studies which cannot be identified with specific works. For example, a bill of 1926-27 describing the treatment of a 'Head of a girl and a self-portrait' notes: 'removed non-original paint, retouched, stretched and varnished' (inv. b 4206 V/1962). The description seems to be of cat. 16, but this is not entirely clear. In the same bill, Traas mentions that two of the 'heads' were glued, as was the portrait of a woman, but it is unclear which works he is speaking of.

30 Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh, 1929: 'Study of a head with a white cap – panel removed, relined, cleaned, retouched and varnished' (inv. b 4218 V/1962).

31 One possibility is 1954, when, according to the letter of conveyance (3 June), the work was brought from the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, to Traas's studio.

32 See the restoration report of 1958; the treatment was carried out by restorer C. van Voorst from the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

33 'Catalogues des œuvres de Vincent van Gogh,' circa 1890 (inv. b 3055 V/1962), nos. 11 and 12 and 'Lijst van werken door Johanna van Gogh-Bonger voor Parijs 1896,' nos. 31 and 32 (inv. b 1437 V/1962).

34 The alternative is F 140 JH 745, which was sold in 1923.

35 Marie de Roode-Heijermans, 'Kunst en Letteren,' Het Volk (12 August 1905).

even darker; the original colour is visible through the craquelure. The drab areas around the head appear to have been painted in at the very end, and overlap both the shoulders and part of the face. In number 10 the hairline has been slightly altered: here, the dark underlayer can still be seen beneath the skin tone. The sitter's right pupil is also missing a bit of paint, giving her eyes a rather strange expression. The paint has not fallen off, but was rather shifted, and can now be found on her eyelid (fig. 10a).<sup>17</sup>

It seems likely that Van Gogh worked up his portraits from dark to light, as he did his other works. This is only certain, however, in the case of the old woman (cat. 18), where the microscope reveals darker layers under the flesh tones. Only in two instances do we find evidence of an initial lay-in using thinned paint: a light grey, yellowish tone in the cap of the model in number 14, and a blue-green, transparent layer in the portrait of the old woman (cat. 18).

The varnish of several works has yellowed, making it difficult to appreciate the artist's use of colour. The greenish-looking blouse of the woman in number 10, for example, is actually a wonderful blue, and the cap of the old woman in number 14 is not a drab green-white but rather a creamy white with touches of blue and yellow. In a number of studies the paint has developed 'drips' and there are wrinkles on the surface (cats. 10, 11, 13 and 18). This is due either to an excessive use of binder or the use of copaiba balsam, which Van Gogh occasionally added to his paint to give the colours more depth and shine.<sup>18</sup>

A lack of documentary evidence makes it difficult to date these heads exactly. We know, for example, that Van Gogh included small drawings after his studies in his letters to Theo.<sup>19</sup> In the course of time these sketches became separated from the related correspondence; since, however, Van Gogh does mention them in the body of the texts they may be roughly dated to the period December-January 1885. The museum's collection contains a portrait (cat. 10) for which one such loose sketch is known (fig. 10b). Assuming that Van Gogh chose not simply recent work for these drawings, but rather the best of what he had done over a span of time, this study was probably painted between November 1884 and January 1885.

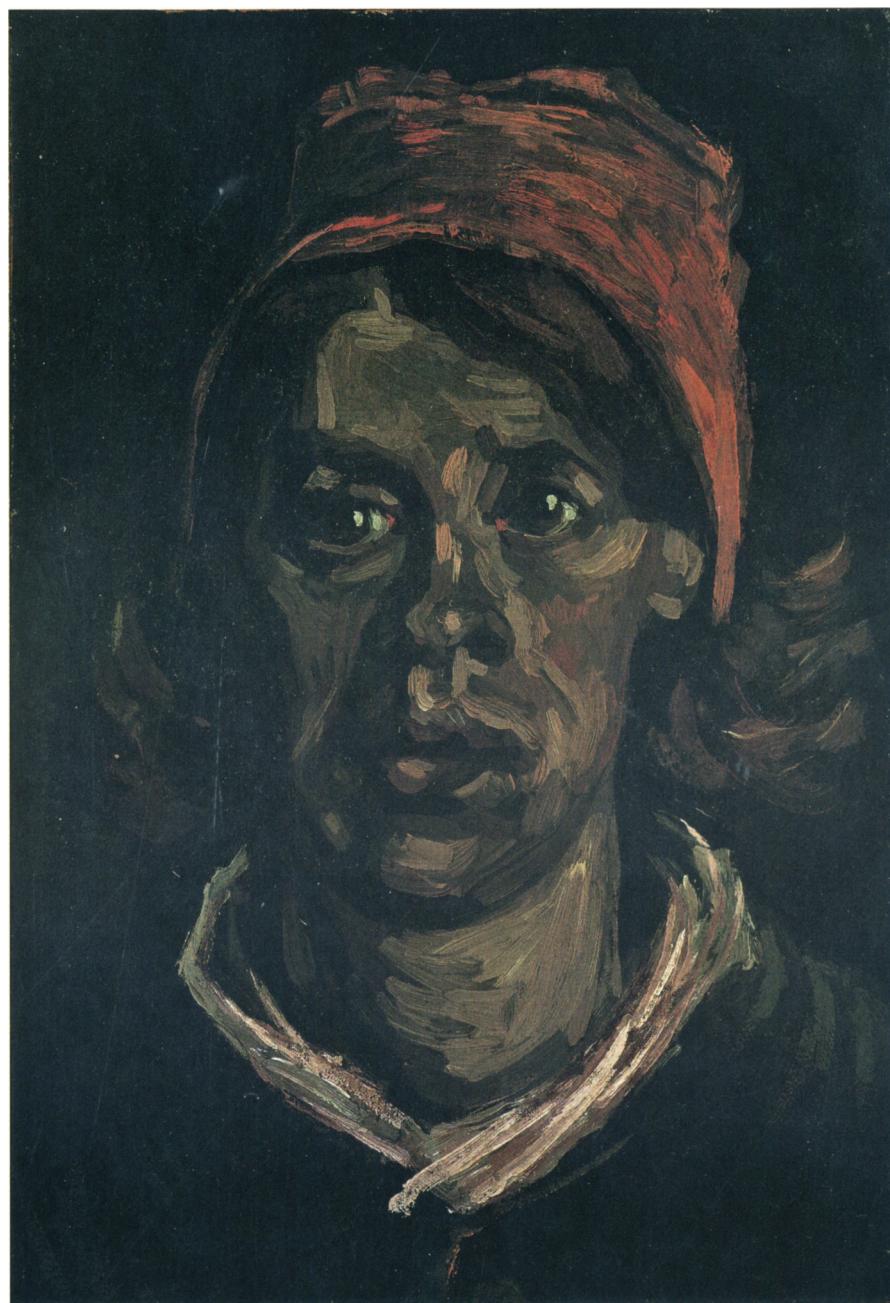
Some of the pictures are actually described in the letters, and in several cases Van Gogh even drew a sketch on the stationary

itself. We know that Theo took several heads back with him to Paris following the funeral of their father on 29 March 1885. Van Gogh mentions these works in the context of another painting he had begun in early April, shortly after his brother's departure. This was 'a head of a young girl, almost a child [...] a contrast of bright red and pale green against the colour of the face, much like one of the heads you took with you' [492/397]. He noted that the new portrait was 'certainly as good as the one you already have, with the big white cap, which is quite like this one (see fig. 10c). And it could even be a pendant to it. If you were to mount them together on gold-coloured board they would certainly look very good, better than they do individually' [492/397].

Only the left-hand image in the sketch can be pinpointed with any certainty: it is the study of Gordina de Groot (*cat. 12*), which – befitting Vincent's satisfaction with it – is even signed.<sup>20</sup>



10b *Portrait of a woman* (F 1171  
JH 570), 1884-85. Amsterdam,  
Van Gogh Museum.



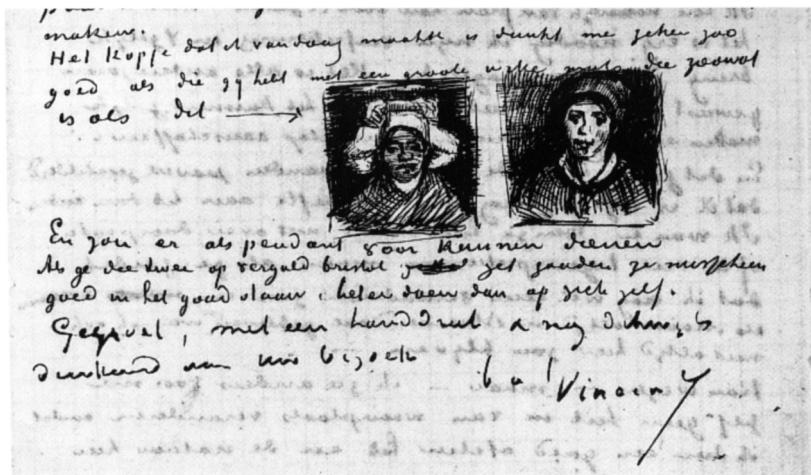
13 Head of a woman



14 Head of a woman

The second portrait is more difficult to determine. It has always been thought to be the woman with the red cap (*cat. 13*), but this identification is not convincing.<sup>21</sup> Although it is true that the cap, her dress and the lighting are reminiscent of the letter sketch, and also that the painting is done as a red-green contrast (although the description of her blouse as ‘pale green’ is less accurate than ‘bright red’ for the cap), the woman in the study can hardly be described as a ‘young girl, almost a child’ [492/397]. The model is certainly not old, but she not a youngster either.<sup>22</sup> All this seems to indicate that the work described and sketched in the letter has disappeared. In that case, the portrait of the woman in the red cap (*cat. 13*) is probably the other study mentioned in the letter, the one Theo had taken with him to Paris. Further evidence is offered by the fact that this painting is also the only one in Theo’s collection to exhibit these complementary colours.

Van Gogh had probably begun work on these two portraits, which Theo would eventually take with him (*cats. 12 and 13*), at the beginning of March, when his brother asked him to submit something to the Paris Salon. He had nothing ready, but considered sending some heads, because ‘it might be useful if you meet some people at the Salon to show them something, even if it’s *only* studies’ [488/395]. To this end he ‘began work [...] on several that I’ll



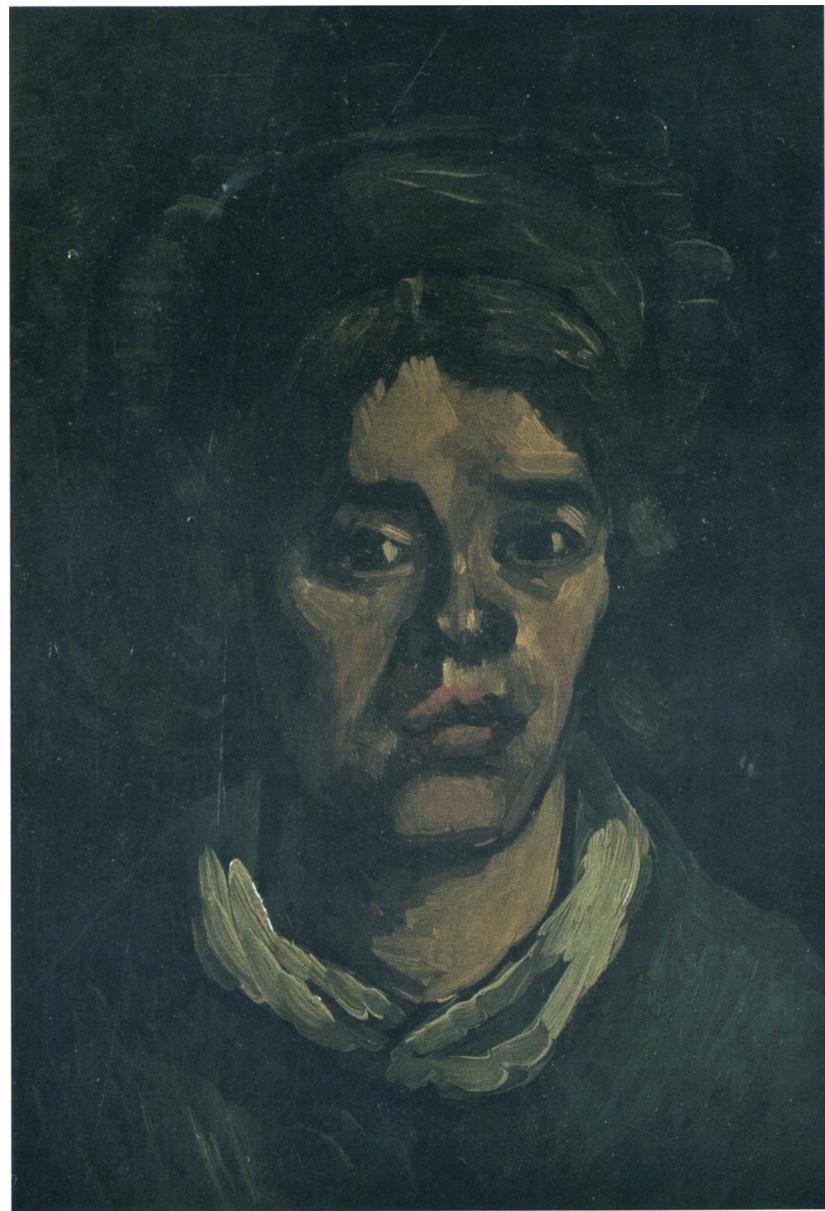
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send you [...]. You'll be getting the heads of an old and a young woman, and probably even more than one of these two models' [488/395]. Their father's sudden death prevented him from sending anything, but, as already noted, Theo took some of the studies with him when he left the Netherlands. It appears that Vincent hurriedly signed the vivacious portrait of Gordina de Groot at his departure: the (later retouched) signature is scratched into the dry surface.

Some of the other works can be dated on stylistic grounds. The portrait of the man with a pipe (*cat. 11*), for example, is very similar to the controlled, rather inexpressive study from the period November 1884-January 1885 (*cat. 10*), when Van Gogh was focused on achieving 'an almost monochrome coloration, where the tones mainly differ in intensity and value' [487/394]. The painting can thus be assigned to the same general time span, although probably between November and February, as this tonal phase lasted until at least the end of that month. The other portraits (*cats. 15-17*) were probably painted later, sometime between March and May. They are a good deal more lively and daring in execution, and were, moreover, likely part of the two shipments sent to Theo in early May and early June, which included mostly recent pictures.<sup>23</sup>



10<sup>d</sup> *Head of a woman* (F 141 JH 783),  
1885. Private collection.



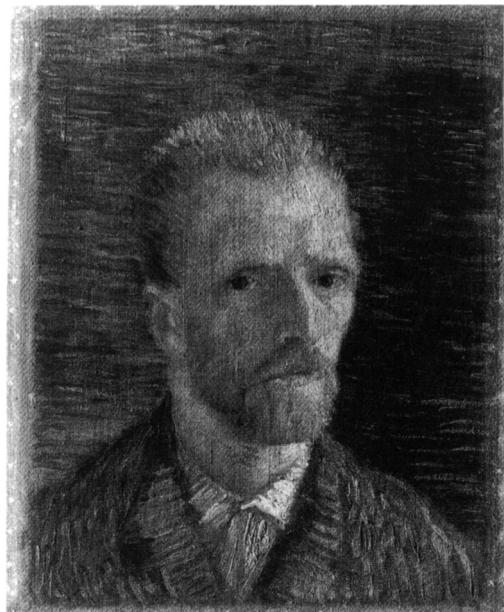
15 Head of a woman



16 Head of a woman

Much later still is the somewhat coarse portrait of the old woman (*cat. 18*); the supple, rough execution calls to mind a head the artist described in a letter from the middle of May (*fig. 10d*).<sup>24</sup> The other study of the same model (*cat. 14*) is the only other portrait of an old woman in Theo's collection, and should therefore probably be identified with the head 'of an old [...] woman' Van Gogh had intended to send his brother in March [488/395] (see above). Theo probably took this portrait with him at the end of the month, along with that of a younger model (*cat. 12*) and the study of the woman with the red cap (probably *cat. 13*), and the *Vase with honesty* (*cat. 8*), making a total of four.

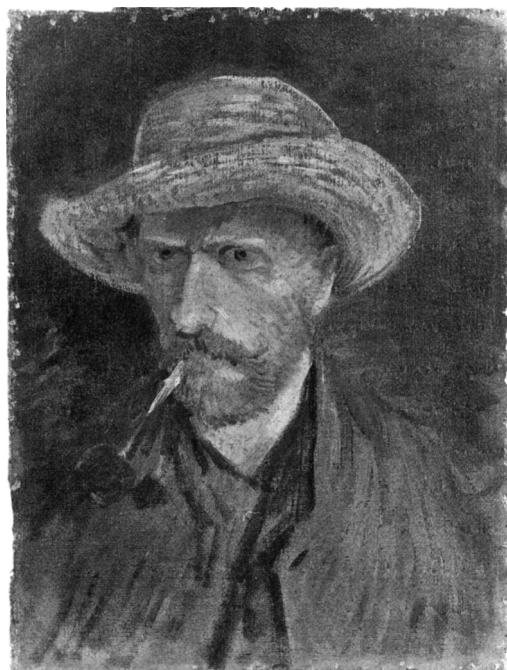
There is transferred newsprint on the surfaces of numbers 13, 15, 16 and 18, indicating that they were once protected by paper, probably while in transit to Paris. Once in the French capital, Van Gogh primed the backs of four of the studies with grey-pink paint (*cats. 10, 16-18*).<sup>25</sup> In two cases – numbers 16 and 17 – he then used the canvas for a self-portrait (*figs. 10e-f*).<sup>26</sup> The verso of number 18 was used for a view of a Parisian kitchen garden



10e *Self-portrait* (F 269v JH 1301).  
1887. Verso of cat. 16.

(fig. 10g). The back of number 10 was never used. We find fragments of this grey-pink ground on the fronts of six studies (cats. 10, 14-18).<sup>27</sup> In the case of number 16 both the paint and newspaper remains are on top of the varnish; this means that the varnish here is original.

Four portraits initially had an extra support (cats. 10-12 and 15): number 12 was laid on panel and numbers 10, 11 and 15 on cardboard.<sup>28</sup> The restorer J.C. Traas removed the cardboard from these in 1929; they were then relined and provided with new stretchers.<sup>29</sup> He detached the panel from number 12 in the same year and also relined it.<sup>30</sup> The earlier portrait of the old woman (cat. 14) is marouflaged on triplex, but we do not know when this was added.<sup>31</sup> Numbers 12, 14, 17 and 18 also exhibit sharp creases in the canvas, perhaps indicating that they, too, were once laid on cardboard. In 1958, the later portrait of the old woman (cat. 18) was given a strip lining and stretched; consequently part of the image on the verso is hidden from view.<sup>32</sup> The study of the woman with the red cap (cat. 13) was given a smaller stretcher at some point: the image goes beyond today's tacking edges.



10f *Self-portrait* (F 179v JH 1300),  
1887. Verso of cat. 17.



10g *Allotment with sunflowers on Montmartre*  
(F 388v JH 1307), 1887. Verso of cat. 18.



17 Head of a man



18 Head of a woman

Of all these heads, the one of the ‘peasant with a red cap’ and the ‘peasant with a white cap’ were the most admired among the family. They were listed separately in Andries Bonger’s inventory of the collection, and were also selected by Johanna van Gogh-Bonger for inclusion in a show at Ambroise Vollard’s gallery in Paris in 1896.<sup>33</sup> The first study is undoubtedly number 13, the second probably the – signed – portrait of Gordina de Groot (*cat. 12*).<sup>34</sup> Both these works – as well as numbers 11 and 15 – were among Johanna’s choices for the 1905 retrospective at the Stedelijk Museum, where the critic Marie de Roode-Heijermans saw them as proof of Van Gogh’s great talent as a portraitist. ‘One may speak of technical deficiencies in some of Van Gogh’s paintings, but this is absolutely not the case with his portraits; most are painted simply, [they are] well put together, grand and full of naive sincerity [...]. There are some among them with such depth of understanding and finesse in the reproduction of character that they equal those of any modern Dutch portraitist.’<sup>35</sup>

## 10 Head of a woman

NOVEMBER 1884-JANUARY

1885

Oil on canvas

42.0 x 33.3 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 72 V/1962

F 156 JH 569

### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 x 14 (fine) threads, open weave, edges cropped, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to very wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, grey-pink paint at edges, pinholes, nail holes. Grey-pink primer on the verso.

### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, pp. 50-51, vol. 2, pl. XL; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 292, 341, 343, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 122, no. 140; De la Faille 1970, pp. 92, 95, 617; Amsterdam 1987, p. 317, no. 1.66; Hulsker 1996, pp. 130-31, 142.

### EXHIBITIONS

1948-49 The Hague, no. 16; 1949 Middelburg, no. 7; 1953 Zundert, no. 9; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 14; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 8; 1953 Assen, no. 8; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 50; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 23; 1960-61 Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg &

Toronto, no. 15; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 8; 1968-69 London, no. 29; 1998-99 Amsterdam, no catalogue.

## 11 Head of a man

NOVEMBER 1884-FEBRUARY 1885

Oil on canvas

29.5 x 37.7 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 69 V/1963

F 164 JH 558

### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 x 18 (medium) threads, medium weave, original edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Traces of underdrawing. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Varnished.

### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-? V.W. van Gogh; ?-1963 Theo van Gogh Foundation; 1963 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; after 1931-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 52, vol. 2, pl. XLIV; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 292, 343, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 152, no. 184; De la Faille 1970, pp. 96-97, 617; Amsterdam 1987, p. 318, no. 1.69; Feilchenfeldt 1988, p. 84; Rome 1988, no. 10; Hulsker 1996, p. 128.

### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 5 [Dfl. 400]; 1914 Antwerp, no. 6; 1914 Berlin, no. 1; 1914 Cologne & Hamburg, no cat. known; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 8

(or cat. 17); 1947 Groningen, no. 7; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 15; 1950 Hilversum, no. 3; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 8; 1951 St. Rémy, no. 8; 1952 Enschede, no. 9; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 11; 1953 The Hague, no. 35; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 21; 1953-54 Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Toledo, no. 29; 1954 Zürich, no. 6; 1954-55 Willemstad, no. 2; 1955 Palm Beach, Miami & New Orleans, no. 2; 1955

Antwerp 1, no. 48; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 21; 1957 Breda, no. 24; 1957 Marseilles, no. 8; 1957 Nuenen, no catalogue; 1957-58 Leiden & Schiedam, no. 2; 1958 Deventer, no. 2; 1958 Mons, no. 2; 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 4; 1960-61 The Hague, unnumbered; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 3; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 3; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 4, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 6; 1968-69 London, no. 34; 1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 4; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 4; 1971-72 Paris, no. 10; 1972 Bordeaux, no. 3; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 122; 1986 Vancouver, unnumbered; 1988 Rome, no. 10; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 8.

## 12 Head of a woman

MARCH 1885

Oil on canvas

42.7 x 33.5 cm

Signed at the lower right:

Vincent (scratched into surface)  
Inv. s 139 V/1962  
F 130 JH 692

### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 19 x 17 (fine) threads, thickly woven, edges cropped, paste lining, formerly canvas on panel (and cardboard?). Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: narrow and medium. Varnished. Details: weave imprints.

### PROVENANCE

March 1885-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

### LETTERS

488/395?, 492/397.

### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 45, vol. 2, pl. XXXVII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 290, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 120, no. 137; De la Faille 1970, pp. 86, 616; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 319, 144-45, no. 1.75; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 161-62, no. 31; Feilchenfeldt 1988, pp. 83-84; Rome 1988, no. 11; Amsterdam 1990, pp. 44-45, no. 5; Hulsker 1996, pp. 152-54, 160.

### EXHIBITIONS

1896 Paris, no cat. known [FF 200]; 1905 Amsterdam, no. 7? [Dfl. 650]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 2? [Dfl. 650]; 1905 Leiden, no. 2?; 1906 Rotterdam, no. 2? [Dfl. 650]; 1906 Middelburg, no catalogue [Dfl. 650]; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 7?; 1928 Berlin, no. 8; 1928 Frankfurt am Main, no. 4; 1928 Vienna, no. 4; 1932 Manchester, no. 3; 1947 Groningen, no. 3; 1948 Bergen & Oslo, no. 6; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 4; 1949 Bolsward, no cat. known; 1953

Zundert, no. 8; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 9; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 7; 1953 Assen, no. 7; 1955 Antwerp 11, no. 16; 1957 Nuenen, no catalogue; 1957 IJzendijke, no catalogue; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 4; 1962 Recklinghausen, no. 22a; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 4; 1963 Sheffield, no. 2; 1963 Humlebaek, no. 4; 1964 Washington & New York, no. 4; 1965 Charleroi & Ghent, no. 3; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 5, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 9; 1968-69 London, no. 30; 1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 3; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 3; 1971-72 Paris, no. 9; 1972 Bordeaux, no. 2; 1975 Eindhoven, no catalogue; 1976-77 Tokyo, Kyoto & Nagoya, no. 12; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 119; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 31; 1988 Rome, no. 11; 1990 Amsterdam, no. 5; 1993 Amsterdam, no. 19; 1998-99 Enschede, no catalogue.

### 13 Head of a woman

MARCH 1885  
Oil on canvas  
43.0 x 30.0 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 6 V/1962  
F 160 JH 722

TECHNICAL DATA  
Canvas, 17 x 14 (fine) threads, open weave, original tacking edges, wax resin lining. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from very narrow to medium. Varnished. Details: transferred newsprint, nail holes.

#### PROVENANCE

March 1885?-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LETTER

492/397.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 51, vol. 2, pl. XLII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 292, 335, 338-39, 342-43, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 135, no. 159; De la Faille 1970, pp. 96, 617; Amsterdam 1987, p. 319, no. 177; Feilchenfeldt 1988, p. 84; Essen 1990, p. 70, no. 2; Hulsker 1996, pp. 158-60.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1896 Paris, no cat. known [FF 200]; 1905 Amsterdam, no. 9 [Dfl. 400]; 1908 Paris, no. 3 [FF 1,470]; 1908 Munich, no. 2 (Dfl. 700); 1908 Dresden, no. 2 [Dfl. 700]; 1908 Frankfurt, no. 2; 1908 The Hague & Amsterdam, resp. no cat. known, no. 2; 1908 Berlin 11, no cat. known [Dfl. 950]; 1910 Berlin, no. 7 [DM 2,000]; 1911 Frankfurt, no cat. known; 1911 Amsterdam, no. 2 [Dfl. 1,800]; 1911-12 Hamburg, no cat. known [DM 1,000]; 1912 Dresden & Breslau, no. 30; 1914 Antwerp, no. 7; 1914 Berlin, no. 2; 1914 Cologne & Hamburg, no cat. known; 1926 Munich, no. 2081 (not for sale); 1929 Utrecht, no. 7 (not for sale); 1931 Amsterdam, no. 12; 1946-47 Liège, Brussels & Mons, no. 26; 1947 Paris, no. 26; 1947 Geneva, no. 26; 1947 Groningen, no. 6; 1947-48 London, Birmingham &

Glasgow, no. 5; 1948 Bergen & Oslo, no. 1; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 11; 1949 Middelburg, no. 8; 1949-50 New York & Chicago, no. 6; 1950 Hilversum, no. 2; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 6; 1951 Arles, no. 6; 1951-52 Nijmegen & Alkmaar, no. 2; 1952 Enschede, no. 8; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 6; 1953 The Hague, no. 33; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 19; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 47; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 20; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 3; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 4; 1961 Humlebaek, no. 74; 1961-62 Stockholm, no. 39; 1963 Humlebaek, no. 7; 1964 Washington & New York, no. 7; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 5; 1968-69 London, no. 37; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 123; 1990-91 Essen & Amsterdam, no. 2; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 7.

### 14 Head of a woman

MARCH 1885  
Oil on canvas marouflaged on triplex  
42.2 x 34.8 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 62 V/1962  
F 80a JH 682

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 x 14 (fine) threads, open weave, edges cropped, marouflaged on triplex, formerly canvas on cardboard (?). Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to very wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, nail holes.

#### PROVENANCE

March 1885?-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LETTER

488/395?

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 33, vol. 2, pl. XXII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 292, 343-44, 377, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 87, no. 84; De la Faille 1970, pp. 68-69, 614; Amsterdam 1987, p. 318, no. 1.68; Hulsker 1996, pp. 150-51, 154, 171.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1948-49 The Hague, no. 13; 1952 Enschede, no. 11; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 5; 1955 Antwerp 11, no. 15; 1957-58 Stockholm, no. 102, Luleå, Kiruna, Umeå, Östersund, Sandviken & Gothenburg, no cat. known; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1996 Vienna, no. 68; 1998-99 Paris, no. 13.

### 15 Head of a woman

MARCH-MAY 1885  
Oil on canvas  
43.8 x 30.0 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 84 V/1962  
F 69 JH 724

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 x 17 (medium) threads, medium weave, edges cropped, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: varying from narrow

to wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, transferred newsprint.

#### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 29, vol. 2, pl. XVIII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 289, 292, 335, 339, 342-43, 346, 352, 367-68, 376, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 80, no. 74; Van Gelder 1942, p. 6; Van Gelder 1949, pp. 9, 11; De la Faille 1970, pp. 65, 614; Amsterdam 1987, p. 319, no. 1.76; Hulsker 1996, pp. 158-59.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 10 [Dfl. 400]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 3 [Dfl. 400]; 1905 Leiden, no. 3; 1906 Rotterdam, no. 3 [Dfl. 400]; 1906 Middelburg, no catalogue [Dfl. 400]; 1974-75 Milan, no. 6; 1984 Nuenen, unnumbered.

### 16 Head of a woman

#### MARCH-MAY 1885

Oil on canvas  
42.2 x 34.5 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 97 V/1962  
F 269r JH 725

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 18 x 14 (fine) threads, open weave, edges cropped. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Varnished (original varnish). Details: weave

imprints, transferred paint, transferred newsprint, nail holes

#### Painting on the verso (fig. 10e).

#### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962

#### PROVENANCE

Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 55, no. 179 verso, vol. 2, pl. XLVIII; De la Faille 1970, pp. 100-01, 618; Amsterdam 1987, p. 320, no. 1.84; Hulsker 1996, p. 176.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 59, no. 269 verso, vol. 2, pl. LXXXII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 293 (269 verso), 344; De la Faille 1939, p. 90, no. 88; De la Faille 1970, pp. 106-107, 622; Amsterdam 1987, p. 319, no. 1.78; Hulsker 1996, p. 159.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1926 Amsterdam, no. 8 (or cat. II); 1931 Amsterdam, no. 13; 1947 Groningen, no. 15; 1998-99 Amsterdam, no catalogue.

### 18 Head of a woman

#### MAY 1885

Oil on canvas  
43.5 x 36.2 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 4 V/1963  
F 388r JH 782

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 18 x 14 (fine) threads, open weave, edges cropped, formerly canvas on cardboard (?). Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Varnished. Details: transferred paint, weave imprints, transferred newsprint, grey-pink paint at edges, nail holes.

#### Painting on the verso (fig. 10g).

#### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-? V.W. van Gogh; ?-1963

Theo van Gogh Foundation; 1963 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1931-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 108, no. 388 verso, vol. 2, pl. CV; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 293 (388 verso), 343-44, 366, 368, 376-77; De la Faille 1939, p. 90, no. 89; De la Faille 1970, pp. 106-07, 626; Amsterdam 1987, p. 320, no. 1.82; Hulsker 1996, pp. 174-75, 180.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1931 Amsterdam, no. 11; 1945 Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1946-47 Liège, Brussels & Mons, no. 27; 1947 Paris, no. 27; 1947 Geneva, no. 27; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 19; 1949-50 New York & Chicago, no. 11; 1952 Enschede, no. 12; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 12; 1953 The Hague, no. 36; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 20; 1954 Zürich, no. 5; 1954-55 Bern, no. 11; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 51; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 24; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 5; 1956 Breda, no. 87; 1957 Breda, no. 25; 1957 Marseilles, no. 9; 1957-58 Leiden & Schiedam, no. 3; 1958 Deventer, no. 3; 1958 Mons, no. 3; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 5; 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 6; 1960 Cuesmes, no. 3; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 5; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 5; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 125; 1993 Amsterdam, no. 21.

### 17 Head of a man

#### MARCH-MAY 1885

Oil on canvas  
42.5 x 32.0 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 68 V/1963  
F 179r JH 786

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 x 14 (fine) threads, open weave, original edges, formerly canvas on cardboard (?). Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Details: transferred paint, grey-pink paint at edges, nail holes.

#### Painting on the verso (fig. 10f).

## 19 Head of a woman

NOVEMBER 1884-MAY 1885

Oil on canvas on panel  
47.8 × 34.8 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 343 V/1966  
F 159 JH -

TECHNICAL DATA  
Canvas, 13 × 18 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, edges  
cropped, oak panel with bevelled  
edges. Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, medium.  
Another image under the paint  
layer. Brush size: impossible to  
determine. Varnished.

PROVENANCE  
November 1885-86 A.C. van  
Gogh-Carbentus, Nuenen/Breda;  
1886-1902 Schrauwen, Breda [?];  
1902-03 W. van Bakel and  
C. Mouwen, Breda [?]; 1903-04  
Kunstzalen Oldenzeel,  
Rotterdam [?]; ?-1956  
H.P. Bremmer, The Hague;  
1956-60 heirs H.P. Bremmer,  
The Hague; 1960-62  
Van Wisselingh, Amsterdam;  
1962-64 H.A.D. Thomas,  
Amsterdam; 1964-65 D. Thomas-  
Mager, Amsterdam; 1966  
donated to the Vincent van Gogh  
Foundation; 1966-73 on loan to  
the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent  
loan to the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

LITERATURE  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 51,  
vol. 2, pl. XLII; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 291, 342, 415;

This unfinished study of a head is a problematic work. Although it was always included in the œuvre catalogues, Jan Hulsken rejected it in 1977. The Van Gogh Museum adopted his view in 1995: both the absence of Van Gogh's typical brushwork and the initial build up in coloured passages seemed to point to another hand.<sup>1</sup>

And, indeed, the picture is an anomaly. It is a study of a woman's head in the earliest stages. No other Van Gogh paintings in a similar, unfinished state have survived, making authentication difficult. Nonetheless, there are enough arguments to (re)attribute the work to him.

Despite the lack of detail, the image contains no elements which deviate from Van Gogh's other head studies of the period November 1884-May 1885 (see *cats. 10-18*). The peasant woman



19<sup>a</sup> *Head of a woman* (F 137 JH 593),  
1885. Private collection.

wears a dark under-cap of a type common in Brabant at the time (see *cats. 15* and *16*). Furthermore, the composition and arrangement of the head is very like that found in a number of Van Gogh's other portraits (*fig. 19a*).<sup>2</sup> The canvas is also of a kind the painter used frequently in Nuenen.<sup>3</sup>

Although the yellowed varnish and overall dirty surface make it appear green or even brown, the background is actually green-blue. The woman's face is painted a reddish brown, while the cap is dark brown. The contour line of her head is of an even darker tone, as is the hair protruding from under her headdress. The background is lighter than the portrait itself, creating the backlit effect we sometimes find in Van Gogh's portraits.<sup>4</sup>

Although the brown is a common enough colour, the blue-green is certainly very typical of Van Gogh's work at this time: he used it repeatedly in the first half of 1885. The surface shows no brushstrokes whatsoever; the image consists mainly of smooth, opaque passages. This led to the work's initial rejection, but closer study of Van Gogh's Dutch œuvre has revealed that he often began his compositions in this way (see, for example, *cat. 7*). The underlying layers elsewhere are, however, less opaque than they are here, but it was only natural that he should have chosen a thick under-coating in this particular case: he wanted to cover an earlier painting.

The overpainted picture, revealed in the x-ray, depicts a bobbin winder or spinning wheel, with a door to the left and a window at the upper right (*fig. 19b*).<sup>5</sup> The object at the lower right is probably a basket containing spools of yarn. Turning the canvas upside down, the shape of the machine is clearly visible in the unfinished portrait, as is the window, now located at the lower left. There is a crack in the paint layer at the right, which discloses the colour of underlying picture: blue.

Although the bobbin winder or spinning wheel appears occasionally in Van Gogh's early work (see *cat. 24*), this image is somewhat unusual. In contrast to his other studies of Brabant interiors, the majority of the canvas here is taken up by an uninteresting wall.<sup>6</sup> Strange, too, and difficult to explain are the mostly horizontal, thick daubs of paint in the lower portion of the head study. In the underlying picture they are located in the upper half and appear to represent some kind of climbing plant; since, however, they also cover part of the window this

De la Faille 1939, p. 142,  
no. 168; De la Faille 1970,  
pp. 96, 617; Amsterdam 1987,  
p. 317, no. 1.67; Catalogue 1995,  
p. 166.

EXHIBITIONS  
None.

<sup>1</sup> Catalogue 1995, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup> See also F 138 JH 644.

<sup>3</sup> See *cats. 7, 11, 35* and *38*.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, F 138 JH 644, F 150 JH 650 and F 135 JH 585.

<sup>5</sup> For the other paintings of this motif see *cat. 24*.

<sup>6</sup> It is also possible that the picture was meant to form part of a larger scene, but this cannot be confirmed. In Catalogue 1995, p. 166, the peculiar subject was also used as a reason to deattribute the painting.

<sup>7</sup> This would indicate that the spinning or winding was taking place outdoors, which seems highly improbable. Photographs from the turn of the century occasionally show women winding outdoors, but this was only because it was too difficult to take such photographs inside the house.

<sup>8</sup> The horizontal stripes could be a path in the foreground (the x-ray must be given a quarter turn to the right). There are, however, no traces of scraping in the x-ray.

<sup>9</sup> On the provenance of these works see *cat. 1*. On the oak panel support see *cat. 2*, esp. fn. 31.

<sup>10</sup> Bremmer probably advised the owners to offer their works for sale through the Oldenzeel gallery. See the notation in Aleida Bremmer-Bekhuis's manuscript Dienaar der kunst (1937-41), dated 5 November 1937, and accompanying a letter from Walther Vanbeselaere to H.P. Bremmer, dated 15 December 1932; both documents are now in The Hague, Gemeentearchief, Bremmer archive.

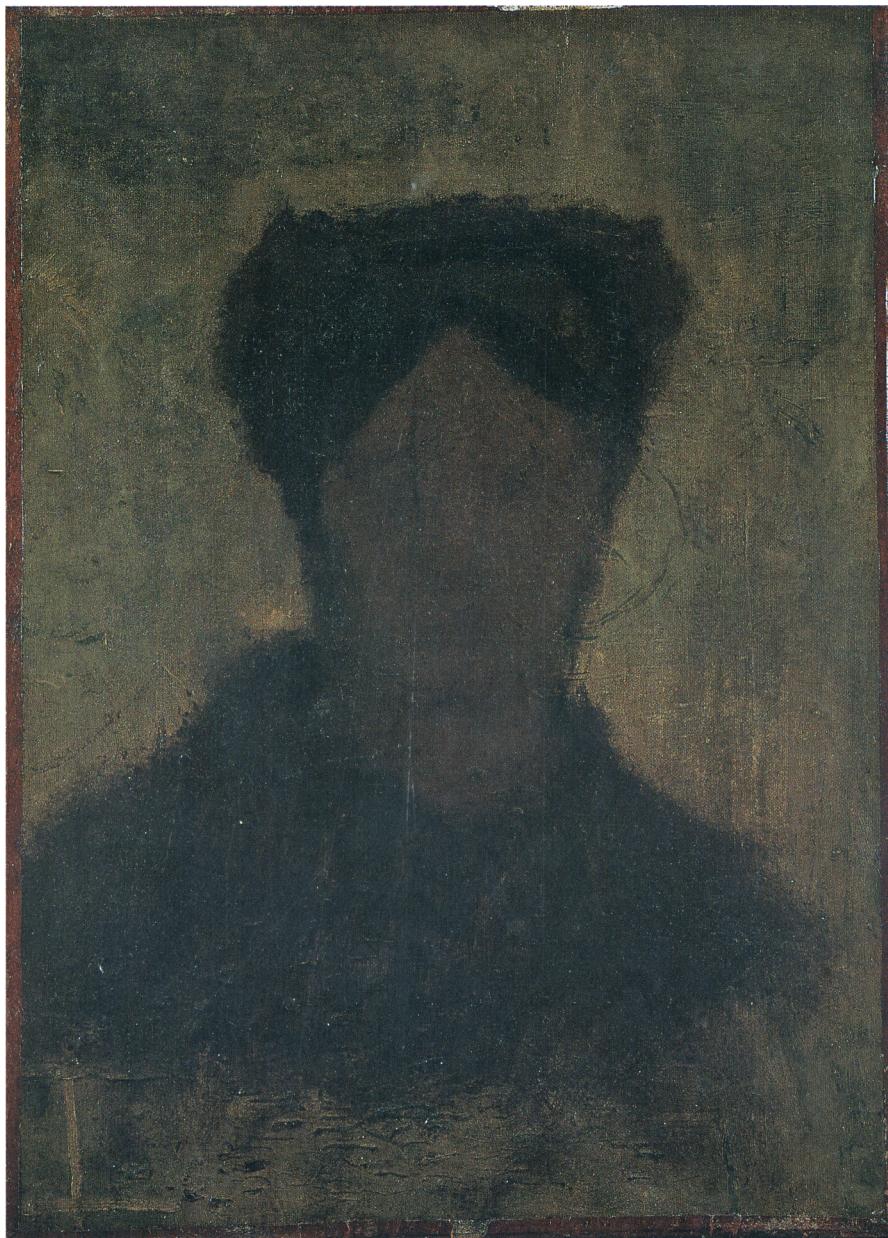
<sup>11</sup> The most important other works were by Adolphe Monticelli (1824-1886); see Amsterdam 1987, nos. 1.313-7.

seems unlikely.<sup>7</sup> They may well be the remnants of a third, partially scraped-off image.<sup>8</sup>

The edges of the painting are covered with brown-red paper; in combination with the support – an oak panel – this gives us a clue to the picture's provenance. Both are characteristic of the paintings exhibited and sold by the Kunstuilen Oldenzeel in Rotterdam in 1903–04, comprising the pictures Van Gogh left behind with his mother when he quit Nuenen in 1885.<sup>9</sup> The first known owner of the unfinished study was the art writer H.P. Bremmer, who had helped Oldenzeel obtain this group of works when they resurfaced in 1902.<sup>10</sup> The picture later came into the hands of the Amsterdam dentist H.A.D. Thomas (died 1964). He left his collection to his mother, under the condition that she eventually donate it to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation. On her death in 1965 it passed to the Foundation. They sold some of Thomas's works and kept others, among them this painting.<sup>11</sup>



19b X-ray of cat. 19.



19 Head of a woman

## 20 Woman with a mourning shawl

MARCH-MAY 1885

Oil on canvas  
33.0 × 45.5 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 58 V/1970  
F 161 JH 788

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 × 14 (thick) threads, thickly woven, original edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard (?). Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: narrow and medium. Traces of underdrawing (IRR). Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, nail holes, pinhole, transferred newsprint.

PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-70 V.W. van Gogh; after 1931-70 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1970 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1970-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 51, vol. 2, pl. XLII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 293, 344, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 139, no. 164; De la Faille 1970, pp. 96, 617; Amsterdam 1987, p. 320, no. 1.83; Hulsker 1996, p. 176.

*Woman with a mourning shawl* is one of the few portrait studies in which traces of a preparatory underdrawing have been found. Infrared reflectography revealed hatching under the model's left hand, and further study under the microscope brought lines under her middle finger and chin to light, probably done in charcoal.

Like the study for *The potato eaters* (cat. 25), the picture is painted using fluid, sometimes almost transparent paint. The palette is limited: green for the background and the clothing, ochre for the hands and face. The artist has paid a great deal of attention to the rendering of chiaroscuro. The background has been lightened where the face is in shadow, to emphasise the shape of the head. The portrait was executed in one sitting, but corrected at a later stage, with Van Gogh adding the raised index finger to her left hand,



20<sup>a</sup> *Woman with a mourning shawl*  
(F 155 JH 787), 1885. Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts.

which was originally a fist. At the top we find a pinhole and several nail holes. Since there is no paint around the pinhole, it seems likely that the canvas was tacked up while the artist worked. There is a sharp crease at the bottom of the canvas; at some point the work probably had a cardboard backing and was bent by accident.

The woman's dress has always been described simply as a shawl or hooded cape, but it can be identified still more precisely. As in another study of a (the same?) woman (fig. 20a), the model wears an – almost invisible – white cap with, over it, a so-called *rouwafalie*. This type of shawl was worn by women in mourning and for attending church following the birth of a child.<sup>1</sup> It was made of a long strip ( $3 \times 1$  m) of black cloth and was folded double and draped over the head. There were local variations in how it was worn, but it was usually left to hang down or a portion was carried over the arm. The number of drawings attests to Van Gogh's particular fondness for this piece of clothing (see fig. 7a).<sup>2</sup> The mourning shawl was seen frequently on the village streets, as the *Avenue of poplars in autumn* (cat. 7) suggests.<sup>3</sup>

In Van Gogh's study, the woman wears her shawl loose. She presses the cloth to her body with her right hand, while holding it closed with her left. Neither gesture is convincing. The raised

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 11  
[Dfl. 600]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 4  
[Dfl. 600]; 1905 Leiden, no. 4;  
1906 Rotterdam, no. 5  
[Dfl. 600]; 1906 Middelburg,  
no catalogue [Dfl. 600].

<sup>1</sup> Van Breugel 1975, pp. 28-30.

<sup>2</sup> F 1196 JH 816; F 1197 JH 817;  
F 1195r JH 818; and F 1195v JH 819.

<sup>3</sup> See also cat. 6; this work also includes women wearing mourning shawls.

<sup>4</sup> See letter 501/404, and Drawings 11, nos. 119-32, pp. 134-43, which gives an overview of Van Gogh's studies of hands.

<sup>5</sup> See letters 504/407 and 510/411.

<sup>6</sup> We find the words 'ouverture' and 'exan[...jateur' in reverse. As we know from letter 505/408, Theo occasionally sent Vincent French newspapers.

<sup>7</sup> Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962).



20b Arm (F 1160v JH 1004), 1884-85.

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.



20 Woman with a mourning shawl

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index finger seems unnatural, and the right hand appears to float before her rather than to rest against her torso. The right hand is also much larger than the left. This leads one to suspect that Van Gogh combined drawn studies from other models in his portrait. This is certainly true of the right hand, which is almost literally adopted from a chalk drawing of an arm (fig. 20b).

Van Gogh painted a number of half-length figures, but nowhere else did he pay equal attention to the hands and face. According to his own statements, he began painting separate studies of heads and hands in the winter, but the extraordinarily confident execution here points to a later date.<sup>4</sup> The study has therefore been assigned to the period March-May, around the time Van Gogh was attempting to put his recently acquired anatomical and physiognomical knowledge to the test in *The potato eaters* (cat. 26).

The work was probably sent to Theo in either the first or the second shipment, at the beginning of May or June 1885 respectively.<sup>5</sup> During the journey, the paint layer may have been protected by a French newspaper, imprints of which can still be found on the surface.<sup>6</sup> There are also some flecks of red paint; the bright colour indicates that they originate from one of the pictures completed in Paris.

Early on, the painting was given a cardboard backing. The restorer J.C. Traas removed this support in 1929 and relined it.<sup>7</sup>

## 21 Woman winding yarn

MARCH 1885

Oil on canvas  
40.5 x 31.7 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 73 V/1962  
F 36 JH 698

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 x 17 (fine) threads, densely woven, cropped edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: varying from very narrow to medium. Varnished. Details: weave imprints.

PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LETTER

489/396.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 21, vol. 2, pl. x; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 294, 350-51, 354, 374, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 59, no. 42; De la Faille 1970, pp. 54-55, 613; Amsterdam 1987, p. 318, no. 1.71; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 168-69, no. 37; Feilchenfeldt 1988, p. 83; Hulsker 1996, pp. 154, 156.

At the end of February or the beginning of March 1885 Theo asked Vincent if he wanted to send any of his work to the Salon, the annual exhibition of contemporary art in Paris. The artist was flattered by the suggestion, but thought his most recent work – studies of heads – was inappropriate to such a prestigious show. ‘[If] only I had known 6 weeks ago I would have painted a spinner or woman winding yarn – a full figure,’ he told his brother [488/395]. It appears from a somewhat later letter that Van Gogh took up the latter subject anyway. After elaborating on the importance of his studies, he promised to send Theo something again soon, writing: ‘as soon as they are completely dry [...] I’ll send you a couple of heads and also a little sketch of a woman winding yarn. And that won’t be all: after more than a year of devoting myself almost exclusively to painting I think it’s safe to say that these are something quite different from the first painted studies I sent you’ [489/396].

Although Van Gogh usually used the term ‘sketch’ to describe drawings, here the context strongly suggests that he did, indeed, mean a



21a Detail of cat. 21.



21 Woman winding yarn

## EXHIBITIONS

1910 Berlin, no. 10 [DM 2,800];  
 1911 Frankfurt, no cat. known;  
 1931 Amsterdam, no. 5; 1948-49  
 The Hague, no. 8; 1949 Middelburg, no. 1; 1957 IJzendijke, no catalogue; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1967 Tilburg, no. 16; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 37; 1988 Rome, no. 4; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 5.

<sup>1</sup> Van Gogh occasionally used the word 'sketch' for works on canvas; see letter 247/215, from mid-April 1882: 'I especially liked the big sketch by Th. Rousseau in Mesdag's collection, a herd of cows in the Alps.' The work referred to is HWM 286. With thanks to Leo Jansen.

<sup>2</sup> De la Faille 1928 and 1939 dates the painting to June/July 1884. This date was based on a mistaken connection of the work to letters 452/370 and 453/371, which mention a woman spinning and a man winding yarn by a window. Both paintings are now lost.

<sup>3</sup> Vanbeselaere 1937 and Hulsker 1989 also assign the picture to March 1885.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to Woman winding yarn, these are cats. 22 and 37. The dating of the latter is based on the image found under the still life, a head of a woman.

<sup>5</sup> The bobbin winder is discussed in detail in cat. 24.

<sup>6</sup> J.C. Traas's bill to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962): 'Woman with a reel [a.o.]. Cardboard removed // relined // cleaned, retouched where necessary and varnished // total, with a new stretcher[s]. Dfl. 11.50 each.' V.W. van Gogh dated the bill 2 January 1930; the restoration was thus carried out at the end of 1929.

<sup>7</sup> On the various occupations of the inhabitants of Nuenen see Den Bosch 1987-88, p. 109.

<sup>8</sup> The drawings are F 68 JH 495; F 1138 JH 486; F 1139 JH 494; F 1140 JH 487 (executed between May and June 1884); F 1290 JH 696; and F 1290a JH 699 (executed between May and July 1885). The letter sketches, F 1137 JH 493, F 1136 JH 496 and F- JH 498, are from the earlier period.

work in oil on canvas.<sup>1</sup> Since *Woman winding yarn* is the only known painting of this particular motif, and its quick, fluid style bars the possibility that it was painted in 1884 – as has been suggested<sup>2</sup> – this is probably the work Vincent refers to in the quotation.<sup>3</sup> There is further support for the March 1885 date. First, the canvas is quite unusual; it was used for only three Nuenen works in the Van Gogh Museum, all of which were probably painted in March or April of that year.<sup>4</sup> The strong lighting is another clue. In the second letter cited above, written in March 1885, Van Gogh mentions that he was busy studying the effects of light, painting figures both against the light (see cats. 22 and 23) and 'turned towards [it]' He had 'already worked on a complete figure several times, a sewer winding yarn or peeling potatoes. Full face and in profile' [489/396].

In *Woman winding yarn*, the bright light enters the dim room from the left, touching the woman's face, her cap, her hands, the upright reel (used for mounting the fibres) and the bobbin winder.<sup>5</sup> A ray of light also falls on the floor and is blended into the surrounding surface with diagonal brushstrokes. Her starkly illuminated face stands out against the dark background. To achieve a similar contrast at the woman's back, Van Gogh painted the wall a slightly lighter tone, as if it, too, were catching the sun. This section and the brighter areas behind the chair and on the floor were added in a second sitting, as was the reel, probably in order to further emphasise the light effects.

The image is smooth and fluidly painted; nonetheless, the brushstrokes are clearly visible, except in the darker areas of the background where the paint is scumbled. Van Gogh used wider brushes for the background at the left than for the woman and her attributes. Her face in particular has been modelled with ease and accuracy, using a fine brush (fig. 21a). As in many works of this period, Van Gogh limited his palette to just a few colours, with an emphasis on brownish green. The thick and very yellowed varnish increase the sense of murkiness. In fact, the woman's dress is much bluer than now appears to the naked eye.

The canvas was once laid on cardboard. This support was removed by the restorer J.C. Traas, probably at the end of 1929; at the same time, he relined the picture and gave it a new stretcher.<sup>6</sup>

When Van Gogh portrayed his (female) models indoors, he often showed them engaged in some kind of domestic task, such as

peeling potatoes, sewing, spinning or winding yarn. Only the latter was not a household chore per say, but rather a necessary preparation for weaving. Cottage weavers, who made up a quarter of Nuenen's working population, were supplied with machine-made yarn from the factories.<sup>7</sup> The strands of yarn were mounted on an upright reel and wound onto little spools using the bobbin winder. The spooled yarn, which the weaver later used to form the weft of his cloth, was collected in a bin or basket, seen here at the woman's feet next to the reel.

In addition to this painting, there are six drawings and three letter sketches depicting figures winding yarn.<sup>8</sup> An earlier version in oil, painted in March 1884, is now lost.<sup>9</sup> Anton Kerssemakers also mentions a picture of a woman winding yarn, but this, too, seems to have disappeared. In that work, Van Gogh had apparently sought to capture the spinning of the winder itself: 'He didn't paint the rods, but only a continuous, monochrome, rounded sweep of transparent grey; this looked so strange that at first I didn't understand what it was supposed to represent, and asked him why he had painted it this way; don't you see, he said, this way you get the idea it's moving.'<sup>10</sup>

Yarn winding is often confused with spinning in the Van Gogh literature. The artist, however, certainly knew the difference; this is demonstrated not only by the correspondence, but was also only natural for someone who spent so much time among weavers. Although we know from the letters that Van Gogh had depicted women spinning – from February 1884 he even owned a spinning wheel himself – none of these images has survived.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The first woman winding yarn is mentioned in letter 440/R43, from the second half of March 1884.

<sup>10</sup> Kerssemakers 1912, 11. *Depicting motion in general and the spinning of a wheel in particular has been a challenge to artists since antiquity. See Jan Baptist Bedaux, 'Velazquez's Fable of Arachne (Las Hilanderas): a continuing story,' Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art 21 (1992), no. 4, pp. 296-305. A possible model for Van Gogh's own work may have been a painting by Anthon van Rappard, who had similarly sought to express movement in a drawing of 1882-83 and a painting from the winter of 1883-84. This may be the work that won Van Rappard a medal at the International and Universal Exhibition in London in April 1884. Van Gogh had seen the picture at Van Rappard's studio in December 1883 and greatly admired it; see letter 451/R50. It is also possible that Van Gogh had seen photographs of objects in motion.*

<sup>11</sup> See letters 407/340; 452/370; 453/371; 454/372; and 457/R47. X-rays, however, have revealed two depictions of women spinning. They can be found under F 194 JH 603 and F 107 JH 933; see Van Heugten 1995, pp. 68-70. A third spinner is known from a reproduction Van Gogh made of one of his paintings at the end of 1884 (inv. b 4762 V/1962). This work, too, is now lost.

## 22, 23 Women by a window

<sup>1</sup> See letter 488/395.

<sup>2</sup> The four other paintings are F 70 JH 715 (a head seen against a window; this is the picture reproduced in the letter; see fig. 22a); F 72 JH 718 and F 73 JH 717 (both full-length figures with backlighting); and F 157 JH 712 (here the woman is not directly in front of the light source). Drawings with a similar light effect are F 1203 JH 710; F 1204 JH 708; F 1205 JH 711; F 1206 JH 705; F 1207 JH 706; F 1207a JH 707; F 1210 JH 709; F 1219 JH 720; and F 1220 JH 703; see Drawings 11, nos. 151-54 and 203, pp. 169-75, 263-65.

<sup>3</sup> See letter 493/398, 5 April 1885: 'This week I'm planning to start on those peasants around a platter of potatoes, in the evening – or perhaps I'll paint it by daylight, or both – or "neither" as you would say.'

<sup>4</sup> Letter 407/340, c. 16 November 1883: 'At a little inn on the road I drew an old woman at a spinning wheel, a dark silhouette – like something from a fairy tale – a dark silhouette against a light window.'

<sup>5</sup> Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962): 'Girl's head in front of a window [a.o.]. Cardboard removed // transferred to canvas // cleaned, retouched where necessary and varnished // all with new stretcher[s], Dfl. 11,50 each.' V.W. van Gogh dated the bill 2 January 1930. The restoration must therefore have taken place at the end of 1929.

<sup>6</sup> It is possible Theo took the painting back with him to Paris following his visit to Nuenen at the end of March, although it seems unlikely the paint was then dry enough. Another possibility is that it was part of the shipment of ten studies sent on 5 May; see letter 503/406.

After months of using his paintings of heads to study proportion, physiognomy, chiaroscuro and colour contrasts, Van Gogh wrote to Theo at the beginning of March 1885 that he was now concentrating on reproducing various effects of light. He not only painted his models and their surroundings by day, but also at night, by lamplight, and was particularly fascinated by their enormous cast shadows.<sup>1</sup> In a second letter of the same month he mentions another aspect that had caught his attention: 'Namely, figures against the light of a window. I've done studies of heads for it, against the light and turned towards [it], and I've already worked on a complete figure several times, a sewer winding yarn or peeling potatoes. Full face and in profile. I don't know if I can get it right; it's quite a difficult effect. But I do think I've learned something from the exercise' [489/396]. Thanks to this passage, which is illustrated with sketches (fig. 22a), a group of six



22a Sketch in a letter to Theo of March 1885 (489/396). Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.



22 Head of a woman

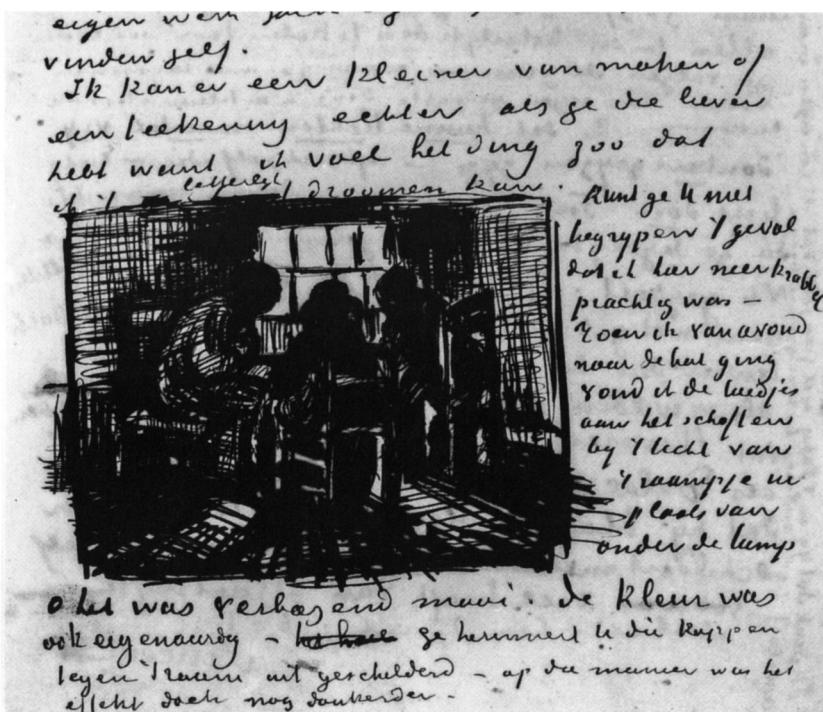
<sup>7</sup> Cat. 37, although painted in the fall of 1885, is included here because another image has been found under today's still life, namely the head of a woman, which was probably painted in the spring.

<sup>8</sup> See fn. 5. The painting was later restored again by a certain Th. F. Kuypers, whose stamp is on the stretcher.

<sup>9</sup> In F 72 JH 718; F 126a JH 655; F 167 JH 689; F 1215 JH 798; and F 1217 JH 700.

paintings and nine drawings can now be dated to around this time. Two of the works on canvas are in the Van Gogh Museum: *Head of a woman* (cat. 22) and *Woman sewing* (cat. 23).<sup>2</sup> The first strongly resembles the letter sketch, and has thus been assigned to March 1885. The *Woman sewing* has been dated more broadly, as Van Gogh probably made similar studies in connection with *The potato eaters*, begun in April. Initially, he was uncertain whether to depict the scene by daylight or in the evening, and so experimented with both possibilities.<sup>3</sup>

In the second letter from March Van Gogh intimated that he intended to 'make a couple of bigger, more worked up things' from these studies, but he probably never did. From a tableau he described at the beginning of May – by now he had already begun to work on *The potato eaters* – it appears that he was still taken with the backlit effect. 'Can you see how lovely the scene was from this rough sketch? When I went to the cottage tonight I found the family eating by the light of the window rather than under the lamp. Oh, it



22b Sketch in a letter to Theo of early May 1885 (502/405). Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum.

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was surprisingly beautiful: the colour was so special – you remember the heads done against the window – it was just like that, only even darker' [502/405] (fig. 22b).

This was not Van Gogh's first depiction of scenes against the light. Already in Etten and The Hague he had drawn figures by a window – mostly women engaged in various household chores – although at the time he did not work up the effect completely. We know from a letter of November 1883 that he did the same in Drenthe: this drawing, a woman at a spinning wheel, has, unfortunately, been lost.<sup>4</sup> The first painted versions were of weavers and people winding yarn, executed in Nuenen in early 1884. In all these works, however, the focus was not the light effect itself; this is only the case with the pictures discussed below.

*Head of a woman* (cat. 22) is smoothly painted. In some places – for example, in the window – the paint layer is so thin that the cream-coloured primer shows through. Infrared reflectography revealed traces of underdrawing on this ground layer. Lines clearly related to the painted image appeared in various parts of the woman's cap and throat, where they run parallel to her shawl, indicating that it was originally located slightly higher. There are also several horizontal and vertical lines; these seem to represent the window panes. This preparatory sketch was followed by a division of the canvas into monochrome passages, which in turn were worked up into areas of light and shade. The base tone for the woman's face is brown, for the window a light grey-green, and for the cap a greenish blue (fig. 22c). Her features are rather freely executed; this makes sense in connection with a backlit effect, where the head is little more than a silhouette against the window.

Van Gogh applied a creamy white over the green of the window, and he modelled the green-blue cap with light and shade. He used the same principal colour in the lit areas of the headdress. The various folds and ridges of her cap are indicated by the direction of the brushstrokes. The cap was obviously the greatest challenge in Van Gogh's effort to reproduce the play of light.

The canvas has been cropped irregularly on all sides. There are (remnants of) small holes at fixed intervals along the edges, suggesting that it was originally tacked to some kind of support. The canvas was later laid on cardboard, traces of which can still be

found in the corners, in the form of diagonal cracks resembling the dog's ears of a well-read book. The cardboard was removed in 1929 by the restorer J.C. Traas, and the work given a backing canvas.<sup>5</sup> The heat used in this process resulted in small blisters over the entire surface.

Although the image appears to be neatly framed at the left and right by the dark jambs of the window, there is still a small portion of the light-blue pane to be found at the upper right edge. It is now obscured by a piece of brown paper, brought on after the relining and curling slightly over the edge of the canvas. There are weave imprints in the paint layer, probably originating from storage or the transport to Paris.<sup>6</sup> The type of canvas used is found in only two other Nuenen pictures in the Van Gogh Museum (*cats. 21 and 37*).<sup>7</sup> Since they were all probably painted between March and April 1885, it may have been available to Van Gogh solely at that time.

The support of *Woman sewing* (*cat. 23*), on the other hand, is of a type Van Gogh often used in the Nuenen period. The pinholes in the upper corners, and the fact that there is no paint but only primer around them, indicate that Van Gogh tacked up the canvas before beginning work. It has been marginally cropped on all sides, on the left by perhaps as much as half a centimetre: here we find only a part of the pinhole. This may have occurred at the same time the canvas was laid on cardboard. This support was removed in 1930 by J.C. Traas and the work given a canvas backing.<sup>8</sup>

Like *Head of a woman*, *Woman sewing* is smoothly painted. Only where the light falls – on her hands, the little table at her knees, and the fabric in her lap – has the paint been more applied



22c Detail of cat. 22.



22d Detail of cat. 23.



23 Woman sewing

thickly (*fig. 22d*). The background is scumbled and reveals few, if any, brushstrokes. The dark, green-blue colour was likely achieved by mixing Prussian blue with bright yellow; traces of these individual colours can be found at the left. It is unclear if Van Gogh first divided this painting, too, into coloured passages. Only in the area of the window do we find a comparable underlying tone – in this case a beige-yellow. Various shades of grey have been applied over it.

To the left of the window – typical for a Nuenen cottage – hangs a mirror with a little tray for holding combs and brushes. The low, three-legged table originated in Drenthe, and is of a type not often found in Brabant. It nevertheless reappears several times in Van Gogh's work of this period.<sup>9</sup> The woman's chair is not planted firmly on the ground; it is impossible to tell whether the woman is rocking or if the artist simply had difficulty depicting it correctly.

**22 Head of a woman**

MARCH 1885

Oil on canvas

38.8 × 31.3 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 132 V/1962

F 70a JH 716

**TECHNICAL DATA**

Canvas, 17 × 17 (fine) threads, densely woven, edges cropped, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Traces of under-drawing (IRR). Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints.

**PROVENANCE**

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; after 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

**LITERATURE**

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 30, vol. 2, pl. xviii; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 289, 291, 338-39, 348, 353, 356, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 82, no. 77; De la Faille 1970, pp. 66, 614; Amsterdam 1987, p. 318, no. 1.72; Hulsker 1996, pp. 156-57.

**EXHIBITIONS**

1905 Amsterdam, no. 8? [Dfl. 400] (possibly F 70); 1953 Zundert, no. 3; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 8; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 3; 1953 Assen, no. 3; 1956 Leeuwarden, no. 4; 1959 Bordeaux, no. 237; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered.

**23 Woman sewing**

MARCH-APRIL 1885

Oil on canvas

43.2 × 34.2 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 7 V/1962

F 71 JH 719

**TECHNICAL DATA**

Canvas, 17 × 14 (medium) threads, medium weave, edges cropped, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Varnished. Details: pinholes.

**PROVENANCE**

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; after 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

**LETTER**

488/395

**LITERATURE**

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 30, vol. 2, pl. xix; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 294, 351, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 83, no. 78; De la Faille 1970, pp. 66, 614; Amsterdam 1987, p. 318, no. 1.73; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 170-71, nr 40; Feilchenfeldt 1988, p. 83; Hulsker 1996, p. 156, 158.

**EXHIBITIONS**

1914 Antwerp, no. 8; 1914 Berlin, no. 3; 1914 Cologne & Hamburg, no cat. known; 1945 Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 6; 1950

Hilversum, no. 6; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 5; 1951 St. Rémy, no. 5; 1952 Enschede, no. 6; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 3; 1954-55 Bern, no. 5; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 49; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 22; 1957-58 Stockholm, no. 100, Luleå, Kiruna, Umeå, Östersund, Sandviken & Gothenburg, no cat. known; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 6; 1959 Bordeaux, no. 236; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 11; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 11; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 3, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 7; 1968-69 London, no. 35; 1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 5; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 5; 1971-72 Paris, no. 4; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 40; 1988 Rome, no. 5; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 4.

## 24 Bobbin winder

MARCH-APRIL 1885

Oil on canvas  
34.0 × 44.3 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 54 V/1970  
F 175 JH 497

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 × 17 (thick) threads, densely woven, original edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, hand primed (?), thin (on the lower edge a very thin stripe, averageing 1 cm in width). Brush size: varying from very narrow to wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, pinholes.

PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-70 V.W. van Gogh; after 1931-70 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1970 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1970-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 54, vol. 2, pl. XLVII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 304, 393, 416; De la Faille 1939, p. 150, no. 181; De la Faille 1970, pp. 99, 618; Amsterdam 1987, p. 316, no. 1.60; Hulsker 1996, pp. 114-15.

The *Bobbin winder* is not mentioned in any of Van Gogh's surviving letters. This has been one reason for the various dates assigned to the painting over the years. Initially, it was believed to have been executed in 1885. Due to the subject matter, it was later placed among the group of weavers, spinners and women winding yarn the artist painted in the first half of 1884.<sup>1</sup> The vivacious execution and backlighting, however, point to the period in March and April 1885 when Van Gogh was fascinated by the effects of various kinds of illumination. This date is further supported by the still-lifelike arrangement, and the picture is certainly more than a simple study of a weaver's tool such as Van Gogh would have painted in 1884.<sup>2</sup> Although rarely mentioned in his letters, we may assume he regularly painted still lifes in the period November 1884-April 1885, in the context of his studies of light, colour and form (see *cat. 9*). The objects give the impression of having been composed and lit with a great deal of care.

The object itself has also been the cause of some confusion: it has been referred to alternately as a spinning wheel and a bobbin winder. The former are more commonly known than the latter, but the misunderstanding may also have arisen from the fact that Van Gogh actually owned a spinning wheel.<sup>3</sup> This first came to light in 1912, when Anton Kerssemakers published his reminiscences of the painter. He described Vincent's studio: 'A huge pile of ashes around the stove, which was never swept or polished, a couple of worn-out rush-bottomed chairs, a cabinet with about 30 different birds' nests, all kinds of moss and plants from the moors, a few stuffed birds, a bobbin, a spinning wheel, a bedpan, every conceivable kind of farming tool, old caps and hats, grimy women's head coverings, clogs, etc., etc.'<sup>4</sup>

Despite their similar appearance, spinning wheels and bobbin winders are very different instruments, with different applications. Both were used in preparation for weaving: the spinning wheel to spin fibres into thread, and the bobbin winder to wind this thread onto spools. In Van Gogh's time, home spinning was no longer a



24 Bobbin winder

## EXHIBITIONS

1984 Nuenen, unnumbered;  
1998-99 Amsterdam,  
no catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> *De la Faille* 1928 does not date the Bobbin winder, but includes it in the group of 'Tableaux non mentionnés dans ses lettres.' It was first dated to October-November 1885 by Vanbeselaere in 1937. *De la Faille* adopted and extended this date in his revised edition of 1939, concluding that it was painted sometime in 1885. Hulsker assigned it to June 1884. The 1987 catalogue of the Van Gogh Museum's collection placed it in the first half of 1884. None of these datings, however, were supported by arguments.

<sup>2</sup> The cloth delicately draped over the apparatus – an element not included in Van Gogh's other pictures with bobbin winders – also points in this direction. Only in one other work – F 29 JH 471 – do we find a piece of cloth hanging from the winder. There, however, it is hardly visible and has no apparent compositional function.

<sup>3</sup> On 25 February 1884 Van Gogh told Van Rappard that he had 'gotten a hold of spinning wheel'; see letter 433/R40.

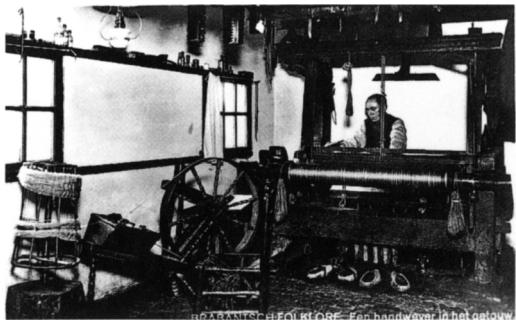
<sup>4</sup> Kerssemakers 1912. The studio in question was located at the home of the curate Schafrat, who rented two rooms to Van Gogh beginning in May 1884. In May 1885 the artist also took up residence there.

<sup>5</sup> See cat. 21, fn. 8. Only F 1290 JH 696 has no reel.

necessity, and the weavers worked mostly with machine-made yarn. The women Van Gogh observed spinning in Nuenen were probably simply making thread for their own use. Yarn winding, on the other hand, remained an important part of the weaving process (see cat. 21 and fig. 24a). The presence of an upright reel in most of Van Gogh's winding pictures leaves no doubt as to the figures' occupation.<sup>5</sup> The thread was first mounted on the reel and then transferred to the spools using the bobbin winder.

Initially, the bobbin winder in this painting does seem to resemble a spinning wheel. Spinning wheels often had such broad-rimmed wheels with turned spokes and tension screws, like the one here at the left, located on the block (the sloping base to which the legs are attached). The screw was used to regulate the tension of the thread as the spindle became fuller. But bobbin winders, too, occasionally had tension screws, as we see in some of Van Gogh's works.<sup>6</sup> Various other parts of the object, however, indicate that it is indeed a bobbin winder. For example, parallel to the lower part of the belt that connects the wheel to the rest of the unit, we find a metal shaft for the cores onto which the thread is wound. The wheel was turned by hand and drives the shaft via the belt.<sup>7</sup> In the middle of the block there appears to be a kind of hollow containing elongated objects. These may be empty spools.<sup>8</sup> The final clue is the little basket on the ground. Although it is unclear what it contains, the form and colour suggests full spools. This is supported by the fact that Van Gogh included a basket in a number of his yarn-winding pictures.<sup>9</sup> It is, of course, possible that this bobbin winder was actually once a spinning wheel, converted when spinning became obsolete.<sup>10</sup>

The bobbin winder is accurately captured, thinly and smoothly painted. In some areas the paint is so thin that both the ground and the transparent greenish base tone can be seen. This was followed by a layer of brown-green. Van Gogh then painted the bobbin winder, worked up the foreground with ochre and the background with Prussian blue. The brushstrokes follow the contour of the wheel, indicating that this final coat was added after the winder had already been completed. The basket also came later; it is painted over the ochre not under it. The last step was to paint in the shadowed areas of the winder; here Van Gogh used a dark colour, probably Prussian blue, highlighted with white and yellow (fig. 24b), thus increasing the chiaroscuro effect. The various objects were



<sup>24a</sup> Photograph of the interior of a weaver's cottage with bobbin winder and upright reel, c. 1935. Nuenen, J.C. Jegerings photograph collection.

probably lit from different angles, from above and from the back left. The play of light and shade on the basket seems to point to a third light source, slightly to its left and front. Although one might expect Van Gogh to have paid careful attention to the shadows in a study of light effects, oddly enough the direction of those cast by the legs do not entirely correspond with the three light sources: each one falls in a different direction.

As in his still lifes, Van Gogh only vaguely suggests the surrounding space. Only at the right does he give a clear indication of where the floor ends and the wall begins: there is a hint of a corner, the right-hand segment in grey-green, the left-hand in dark green. According to Vanbeselaere, this painting exemplifies Van Gogh's new concept of perspective in a series of pictures. He called it 'stretching,' 'the snubbing of the laws of perspective' and 'mannerist.'<sup>11</sup> Exactly what he meant remains unclear, however.

There are weave imprints in the more impasted areas of the paint layer, originating from either storage or transportation. It is certain, however, that the cream, pink and light blue fragments of paint embedded in the surface resulted from the conditions in Paris, where it was likely kept together with works from this period (see the Introduction).

The canvas itself is probably a remnant. The weave is irregular, and the lower edge is so thinly primed that the structure of the cloth is more visible here than in the rest of the painting. The irregularity of this edge, varying from 0.6 to 1.5 cm, leads one to suspect the artist primed it himself; there is also a good deal of cusping here. Judging by the pinholes (or parts thereof) in the four corners, Van Gogh probably tacked it up before beginning to paint. They are surrounded only by ground and cannot therefore have been made later. In 1929 the restorer J.C. Traas removed the cardboard backing; he relined the picture and gave it a new stretcher.<sup>12</sup>

6 The bobbin winders in F 68 JH 495 and F 1139 JH 494 also have tension screws. The Nederlands Textiel Museum in Tilburg also has several bobbin winders with tension screws. With thanks to Jan Esman, Nederlands Textiel Museum.

7 One would expect a larger core on a spinning wheel; it would have been located between two vertical segments to the left of the spike.

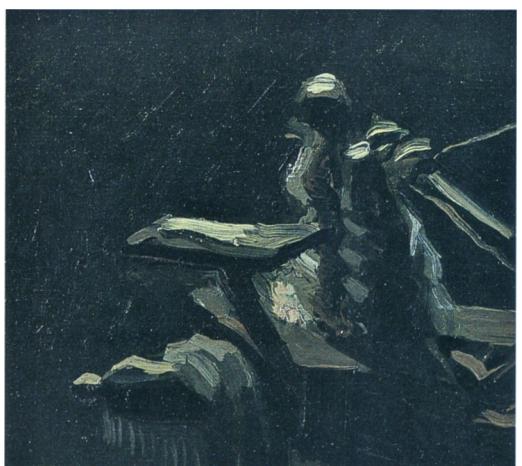
8 Most bobbin winders had a kind of tray on the block for this purpose; see F 1139 JH 494. The fact that there is no tray here certainly played a role in the object's (mis)identification; see Rooijakkers 1990, p. 53, fn. 62. There are also no trays in F 68 JH 495, F 1136 JH 496 and F 1137 JH 493, undeniably depictions of women winding yarn. The Nederlands Textiel Museum owns several examples of bobbin winders without trays.

9 We also find baskets in F 1290a JH 699, F 1140 JH 487 and F 36 JH 698.

10 With thanks to Jos Vellekoop-Knigge for her help and dedication in researching both the spinning wheel and the bobbin winder.

11 Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 392-93.

12 Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962). V.W. van Gogh dated the bill 2 January 1930. The restoration must therefore have taken place at the end of 1929.



24b Detail of cat. 24.

## 25 Study for 'The potato eaters'

EARLY APRIL 1885

Oil on canvas  
33.5 × 44.4 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 135 V/1962  
F 77r JH 686

**TECHNICAL DATA**  
Canvas, 14 × 17 (fine) threads, open weave, original edges, not relined, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from very narrow to very wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, grey-pink paint at the edges, pinhole, nail hole, fingerprint.

Painting on the verso (fig. 25d).

**PROVENANCE**  
May 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger;  
1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962  
Vincent van Gogh Foundation;  
1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on  
permanent loan to the Van Gogh  
Museum, Amsterdam.

**LETTER**  
505/408.

**LITERATURE**  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, pp. 31-32, vol. 2, pl. xxi; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 295, 343, 351, 356, 362-63, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 92, no. 91; Van Gelder 1947, p. 8; Boime 1966, pp. 250-51; De la Faille 1970, pp. 68, 614;

At the end of February 1885 Theo asked Vincent if he would like some help submitting something to the Paris Salon.<sup>1</sup> This prompted the artist to consider 'working out a few large pieces' [489/396]. Until now he had completed only studies, but could imagine that 'a time [...] when I'll be able to compose readily' [489/396]. He had no specific subject in mind but was simply thinking of doing something with interesting light effects. By the beginning of April, however, he had made up his mind and was ready to get started 'that thing of peasants around a platter of potatoes, in the evening' [493/398]. He also considered doing the scene by daylight, although he soon abandoned the idea, as his large study of the motif demonstrates (fig. 26b). This work became the basis for the definitive version, entitled *The potato eaters* (cat. 26).

Preceeding the large study (fig. 26b) are two drawn sketches of the composition (fig. 25a)<sup>2</sup> and this oil sketch in the Van Gogh Museum. Unlike the large study and the final canvas (cat. 26), our



25a *Four people sharing a meal*  
(F 1227r JH 672), 1885. Amsterdam,  
Van Gogh Museum.

scene consists of four rather than five figures. The two drawings are not mentioned in the correspondence, and Van Gogh only alludes to the sketch in the middle of May 1885; by this time *The potato eaters* was already finished. He was defending his new picture and referred to the sketch – which he had just sent to Theo along with several other studies – merely in passing: ‘Don’t forget [...] that these people don’t sit on matching chairs like you would find in one of Duval’s cafés, for example. The most beautiful thing I saw was the woman simply kneeling – as in the first sketch I sent you’ [505/408].<sup>3</sup> This kneeling woman is the one in the foreground, seen from the back.<sup>4</sup>

The painting depicts the house of Van Gogh’s acquaintances, the De Groot-Van Rooij family (fig. 26d), located in Nuenen on the road to Gerwen.<sup>5</sup> To the right is the hearth, with its prominent projecting wall. Along the top we see a small piece of the valance used to decorate the overhanging portion of the chimney (fig. 25b). Van Gogh seems to have depicted the scene from a position within the hearth, and this has produced some perspectival incongruities: the canopy, the projecting wall and the back wall of the hearth are impossibly related. Above the hearth hangs a clog with kitchen utensils; on the wall to the left is a clock and probably also a mirror. While his companions consume their meal, the

Amsterdam 1987, p. 319,  
no. 1.74; Van Tilborgh 1993,  
pp. 11-12, 18-19, 99-101; Hulsker  
1996, pp. 152, 154, 156, 162.

**EXHIBITIONS**  
 1905 Amsterdam, no. 445  
 [Dfl. 600]; 1945 Amsterdam,  
 unnumbered; 1948-49  
 The Hague, no. 14; 1956  
 Leeuwarden, no. 5; 1957-58  
 Stockholm, no. 101, Luleå,  
 Kiruna, Umeå, Östersund,  
 Sandviken & Gothenburg,  
 no cat. known; 1962 Reckling-  
 hausen, no. 22c; 1965 Nuenen,  
 unnumbered; 1975 Eindhoven,  
 no catalogue; 1980-81 Amster-  
 dam, no. 124; 1993 Amsterdam,  
 no. 9; 1998-99 Amsterdam,  
 no catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> Theo made his offer in letter 488/395.

<sup>2</sup> The two drawings are fig. 25a and  
F 1168r JH 666.

<sup>3</sup> Van Gogh is here referring to the establishments designed by the French architect Charles Jérôme Alphonse Duval (1800-1876). See also fn. 13.

<sup>4</sup> Because the woman in the foreground was replaced by a child in the definitive version, both Van Gelder 1942 (p. 7) and De Brouwer 1984 (p. 82) mistakenly described the figure in the oil sketch as a young girl. In his letter, however, Van Gogh clearly states that she is a (grown) woman. On the other hand, it was unusual for adults to kneel at the table.

<sup>5</sup> See Stokvis 1926, p. 29, with additional information supplied in De Brouwer 1984, p. 82. Of course, this assumes that the cottage in the oil sketch is the same one shown in the final version (cat. 25). Many attempts have been made to identify the five figures in that painting; similarly, De Brouwer 1984 (p. 82) also sought to give names to the people in the sketch. Van Gogh had no intention of depicting individuals, however, so that these identifications are impossible to verify, particularly in light of the absence of further documentation. Of the five figures in *The potato eaters* (cat. 26) only the woman at the left can be named with any certainty: she is probably Gordina de Groot; see cat. 12 and



25b *The frugal meal*, postcard, c. 1919.

Nuenen, J.C. Jegerings photograph collection.

*cat. 26, fn. 7.* For an overview of the attempts to identify the personages in *The potato eaters* see Van Tilborgh 1993, pp. 46–47, fn. 47 and a letter from Jan Hulsker (9 January 1993).

<sup>6</sup> It was De la Faille 1928 who first noted that the man is reading a newspaper or magazine, although this was not taken up by later authors. His reading material was apparently considered to be part of the table, but it is actually smaller. Its left edge is visible under the man's right hand, while the leg of the table can be seen to the left of the woman in the foreground.

<sup>7</sup> Stokvis 1927, p. 12. Van de Wakker was referring to the final composition, but it is obvious Van Gogh actually meant the oil sketch.

<sup>8</sup> Van Tilborgh 1993, p. 99, suggested that the oil sketch was a reasoned attempt to enliven the composition in the drawings; given the quotation in letter 505/408, however, this cannot have been the case.

<sup>9</sup> Van Gogh eliminated this problem in the large study that followed; see cat. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 356.

<sup>11</sup> Hulsker 1996, p. 152 dates the work to March, but does not argue the case more closely.

<sup>12</sup> Hulsker 1993, p. 31, dates letter 493/398 to circa 5 April. However, Van Gogh also makes mention here of 'these two Sundays,' referring to the Easter holiday. In 1885 this fell on 5 and 6 April. The letter could thus have been written only on 6 April at the earliest.

<sup>13</sup> This appears from letter 505/408, already cited, in which the work is referred to as 'the first sketch I sent you.' Van Tilborgh 1993, p. 11, concluded from this that the sketch had been sent separately sometime before, but because the letter followed the shipment, the statement can only allude to the one just sent. With the word 'first' Van Gogh actually meant 'earliest.' On this shipment see also letter 503/406.

<sup>14</sup> It is certain that three of the six works with paintings on the back (cats. 9, 16–18, 25 and 38) were once laid on cardboard: this oil sketch and cats. 9 and 38. The (rectos of the) first two were exhibited in 1905; the third was not shown at all.

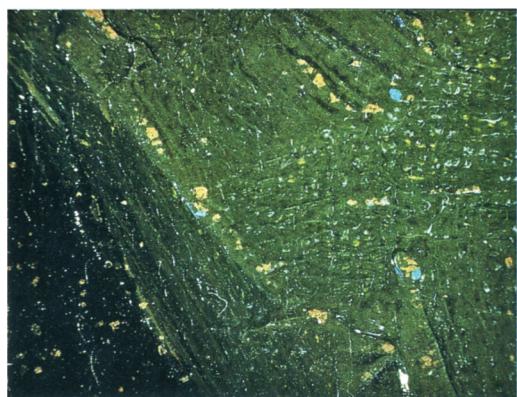
<sup>15</sup> An almost identical notation can be found on the self-portrait on the back of cat. 17; see cats. 10–18, fn. 30.

<sup>16</sup> 'Drie onbekende zelfportretten van Vincent van Gogh,' *Algemeen Handelsblad* (13 December 1929) and 'Vincent van Gogh. Zelfportretten ontdekt,' *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant* (13 December 1929). Traas described the treat-

man at the left reads a newspaper or magazine.<sup>6</sup> They take their food from a single dish, as country people continued to do well into the 20th century. As in the drawings, it is unclear exactly what they are eating.

This sketch is not the considered result of a well-thought-out plan. From his own description it would seem that Van Gogh did not pose the kneeling woman in the foreground, but rather found her that way. The same was undoubtedly true of the man reading, particularly since this activity was not included in the large study that followed. The incidental nature of the scene is confirmed by the reminiscences of Willem van de Wakker, one of Van Gogh's Eindhoven pupils. According to him, Van Gogh had described how he had come to the De Groot's house one evening during mealtime and had simply spontaneously captured what he saw before him.<sup>7</sup> His enthusiasm was presumably sparked by the light effects in the cottage. In any case, he later wrote that the final scene (*cat. 26*) was an elaboration of 'a motif I [had] sought to paint, attracted by the peculiar lighting in the dingy cottage' [529/R57], referring perhaps to the oil sketch.

Here, the family is depicted from the same angle as in the preceding drawings (see *fig. 25a*), but they are grouped differently around the table. The arrangement was an accidental one, but Van Gogh was pleased with it nonetheless and used it again as the starting point for the large study (*fig. 26b*).<sup>8</sup> There was only one disadvantage: the figure in the foreground blocked the view of the platter of potatoes, which had always been given a prominent place in the drawings.<sup>9</sup>



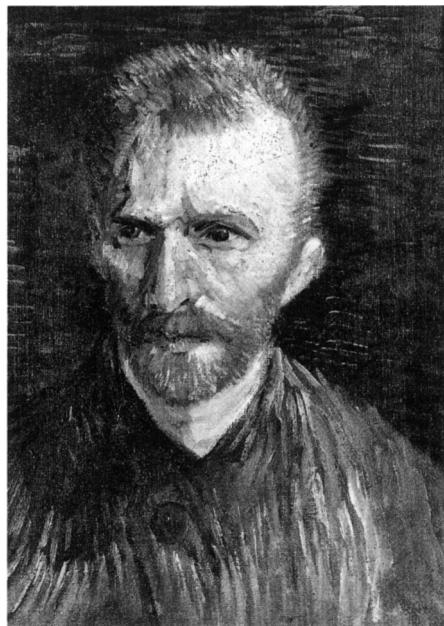
<sup>25c</sup> Detail of cat. 25.



25 Study for *The potato eaters*

ment in his bill: 'cardboard removed [...], both sides cleaned, retouched, varnished and furnished with a new oak frame' (inv. b 4208 V/1962).

This oil sketch was Van Gogh's first exercise in reproducing the effects of lamplight. Although this is a far more difficult undertaking than depicting backlit figures in daylight (see *cats.* 22 and 23), the artist did succeed. He neglected the overall forms, concentrating instead on the rendering of light and shade. The light thus falls 'in dashes on the hands and faces, the table and the wall,' as Vanbeselaere wrote.<sup>10</sup> The dominant tone is green with blue as the next closest shade – the colour of 'green soap' as Van Gogh later described the lighting in the cottage [509/410]. In the background, the undermost paint layer is a thin olive green, followed by an opaque dark green and then grey-green. Some of the elements were painted in a startling shade of light blue, among them the clothes of the man at the left, but this was later toned down using a shade of grey-green. After painting the contours of the head, the halo of steam around the young woman's head was added using horizontal brushstrokes in light green. Small holes all around the edges suggest that the canvas was attached to a support during painting; some of these were filled in during an earlier restoration. At the upper left we find a pinhole and a fingerprint.



25d *Self-portrait* (F 77v JH 1304), 1887.  
Verso of cat. 25.

We do not know when exactly the sketch was painted. In the letter to Theo cited above Van Gogh speaks of '*that thing* [emphasis added] of peasants around a platter of potatoes' [493/398], which seems to imply that his brother had seen some of the studies of this motif when he was in Nuenen for their father's funeral at the end of March. These could have been either drawings or the oil sketch, or both.<sup>11</sup> However, the letter from the middle of May containing the description of the sketch does not give the impression that Theo had already had a chance to look at the picture he was about to receive. It seems most likely that the work was executed shortly after the announcement that he would soon begin work on '*that thing of peasants*' [493/398].<sup>12</sup> This was written in early April, and at that time Van Gogh was still considering doing a daylight scene. Assuming that the oil sketch did play an essential role in his final decision to paint an evening meal, the picture must have been carried out after this date.

At the beginning of May Vincent sent Theo 'a number of painted studies' [504/407] through the regular post, among them this one.<sup>13</sup> There are weave imprints in the impasto, probably the result of stacking. Like many other Nuenen pictures, Van Gogh coated the back of the sketch with a grey-pink primer during his sojourn in Paris, traces of which can be found around the edges of the scene. He then used the verso for a self-portrait (fig. 25d). There are fragments of paint in both grey-pink and other colours on the surface of the meal scene, indicating that it was laid against a Paris work with the same ground (fig. 25c).

The self-portrait disappeared when the picture was laid on cardboard. This may have occurred in 1905, when the meal was chosen for inclusion in the retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and a new support was deemed necessary.<sup>14</sup> Pencilled on the image on the verso are the words 'dit vervalt' (cancelled), presumably indicating that this was the side to which the support should be attached.<sup>15</sup> The self-portrait came to light once again in 1929 when the restorer J.C. Traas removed the cardboard.<sup>16</sup>

## 26 The potato eaters

MID-APRIL-EARLY MAY  
1885

Oil on canvas  
82.0 x 114.0 cm  
Signed on the left chair: Vincent  
  
Inv. s 5 V/1962  
F 82 JH 764

**TECHNICAL DATA**  
Canvas, 14 x 17 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original  
tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, medium.  
Brush size: varying from very  
narrow to very wide. Varnished.

**PROVENANCE**  
May 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger;  
1916-19 on loan to the  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam;  
1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962  
Vincent van Gogh Foundation;  
1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on  
permanent loan to the Van Gogh  
Museum, Amsterdam.

**LETTERS**  
497/401, 499/402, 500/403,  
501/404, 502/405, 503/406,  
504/407, 505/408, 506/409,  
509/410, 515/R53, 522/418,  
529/R57, 535/424, 576/W1,  
663/520, 669/B15, 679/533,  
864/629.

**LITERATURE**  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 33,  
vol. 2, pl. xxi; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 296-97, 353-72, 414;  
De la Faille 1939, after p. 96.

*The potato eaters* was Van Gogh's first large-scale figural work, the picture with which he hoped – after nearly two years of practice – to prove himself to the outside world. He was well aware that his skills were not yet sufficiently honed for such a major undertaking, but was nevertheless determined to put himself to the test: 'I always do what I can't yet do, in order to learn how to do it' [529/R57], he wrote later.

The peasant meal was a popular subject throughout Europe at the time. In the Netherlands the motif had become fashionable thanks to the work of Josef Israëls (1824-1911), whose *Frugal meal* of 1876 (Glasgow, Glasgow Museums and Art Galleries) had won the artist international fame. The Hague painter later made numerous variations on the theme, one of which at least Van Gogh had certainly seen.<sup>1</sup> He also knew the Belgian artist Charles de Groux's (1825-1870) *Le bénédicte* (1861) (fig. 26a), which depicts a labourer's family saying grace before a meal.<sup>2</sup>

The choice of subject matter bears witness to Van Gogh's perfect understanding of his own limitations. Because he had almost no experience painting full-length figures, he opted for a scene in



26a Charles de Groux, *Le bénédicte*,  
1861. Brussels, Koninklijk Museum  
voor Schone Kunsten.



26 The potato eaters

no. 1; Van Gelder 1942, pp. 6-8;  
Derkert 1946, pp. 109-17;  
Van Gelder 1947, pp. 3-12;  
Boime 1966, pp. 249-53;  
De la Faille 1970, pp. 70-71,  
614-15; Werness 1972, p. 76;  
Stark 1982; Amsterdam 1987,  
pp. 142-43, 319, no. 1.79;  
Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 175-77;  
no. 43; Feilchenfeldt 1988, p. 83;  
Pollock 1988; Amsterdam  
1988-89, pp. 64-65, no. 19;  
Amsterdam 1990, pp. 47-49,  
no. 7; Heijbroek 1991, pp. 202,  
206; Van Tilborgh 1993;  
Hulsker 1996, pp. 162, 168-69,  
172.

## EXHIBITIONS

1892 Amsterdam, no. 1; 1896  
Paris, no cat. known [not for  
sale]; 1905 Amsterdam, no. 26  
[not for sale]; 1905 Utrecht,  
no. 12 [not for sale]; 1914  
Antwerp, no. 5; 1914 Berlin,  
no. 9; 1914 Cologne & Hamburg,  
no cat. known; 1915 Amsterdam,  
no. 1; 1924 Amsterdam, no. 2;  
1926 Amsterdam, no. 1; 1930  
Amsterdam, no. 1; 1930  
Hilversum, no cat. known; 1935  
Den Bosch, no. 35; 1935-36  
New York, Philadelphia, Boston,  
Cleveland, San Francisco,  
Kansas City, Minneapolis,  
Chicago & Detroit, no. 9 1937  
Paris, no. 24; 1937 Oslo, no. 1;  
1938 Copenhagen, no. 3; 1938  
Eindhoven, no. 44; 1938  
Amsterdam, no. 16; 1945  
Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1946  
Maastricht & Heerlen, no. 20;  
1946 Stockholm, Gothenburg &  
Malmö, no. 12; 1946 Copen-  
hagen, no. 11; 1946 Amsterdam,  
no catalogue; 1946-47 Liège,  
Brussels & Mons, no. 25; 1947  
Paris, no. 25; 1947 Geneva,  
no. 25; 1947 Groningen, no. 8;  
1947-48 London, Birmingham &  
Glasgow, no. 6; 1948 Bergen &  
Oslo, no. 2; 1948 Amsterdam,  
unnumbered; 1948-49

which his characters could be shown sitting down. Like De Groux, he confined himself to half-length figures,<sup>3</sup> and could thus concentrate all his energy on the heads – a motif he had been hard at work on since the winter (see *cats. 10-18*). He rendered them *en face*, *en trois-quarts* and in profile, writing later that they (along with the hands) were the ‘most important’ elements in the painting [529/R57].

The composition has now become much more complex than in the small oil sketch (*cat. 25*). There are now five rather than four figures, and two are engaged in a new activity – serving and drinking (chicory) coffee. The interior itself has been given both form and character. There is a window in the background, as well as a door with a transom window and, to the left, a box bed, and the ceiling has been articulated with a roof beam.<sup>4</sup> Other details add an increased sense of homeliness: the table is covered with a linen tablecloth and the clock indicates that it is just seven;<sup>5</sup> the clog with kitchen utensils hanging on the chimney wall has been joined by a pig’s bladder, some sausages and a box containing salt. In the foreground, just to the right of the woman, Van Gogh has placed a kettle. To indicate that the family was Catholic, he adds a ‘house



26b Study for *The potato eaters*  
(F 78 JH 734), 1885. Otterlo, Kröller-  
Müller Museum.

blessing,' hanging on the left: a devotional print of the Crucifixion, here with the Virgin Mary and St John.<sup>6</sup>

Apart from the kettle, the roof beam and the added objects in the hearth, all the other elements can already be found in the large-scale study from the beginning of April (fig. 26b). Here Van Gogh had sought to rid the composition of the evident drawbacks of the first little oil sketch (*cat. 25*). The kneeling woman in the foreground made an excellent *repoussoir*, but blocked the view of the table; she was therefore replaced by a standing child. He filled the space created to the left with a new woman, the fifth figure already mentioned.<sup>7</sup> The platter of potatoes was brought back into view by being pushed to the left. Unfortunately, however, it was now too far away from the old woman at the right for her to eat from, forcing Van Gogh to devise something new for her and her male companion to do: serving and drinking chicory, respectively. The artist thus combined two activities – eating potatoes and drinking coffee – which, in fact, took place at different times in the evening.<sup>8</sup>

Van Gogh had executed a lithograph after the large study (fig. 26c), not so much to celebrate this most recent achievement as to advertise the forthcoming final version. Without so much as having set brush to canvas, he sent the lithograph to Theo, writing that the definitive painting 'could well be something [the dealer] Portier could put on show or that we could send to an exhibition' [497/301].



26c Lithograph after *The potato eaters*  
(F 1661 JH 737), 1885. Amsterdam,  
Van Gogh Museum.

The Hague, no. 12; 1949  
Middelburg, no. 9; 1949-50 New York & Chicago, no. 7; 1950  
Hilversum, no. 1; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 9; 1951 Arles, no. 9; 1951-52 Nijmegen & Alkmaar, no. 1; 1952 Enschede, no. 10; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 7; 1953 The Hague, no. 34; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 22; 1953-54 Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Toledo, no. 30; 1954 Zürich, no. 2; 1954-55 Willemstad, no. 5; 1955 Palm Beach, Miami & New Orleans, no. 5; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 52; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 25; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 4; 1957 Breda, no. 26; 1957 Marseilles, no. 10; 1957-58 Leiden & Schiedam, no. 4; 1958 Deventer, no. 4; 1958 Mons, no. 4; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 7; 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 3; 1960 Brussels, no. 74; 1960-61 Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg & Toronto, no. 12; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 6; 1962 Recklinghausen, no. 22; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 6; 1963 Amsterdam, no. 97; 1963 Humlebaek, no. 3; 1964 Washington & New York, no. 3; 1965 Charleroi & Ghent, no. 2; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 6, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 10; 1968-69 London, no. 38; 1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 6; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 6; 1971-72 Paris, no. 5; 1972 Bordeaux, no. 1; 1972-73 Strasbourg & Bern, no. 1; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 120; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 43; 1988-89 Amsterdam, no. 19; 1990 Amsterdam, no. 7; 1993

Amsterdam, no. 14; 1993 Tokyo, no. 2; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 6.

<sup>1</sup> See letter 210/181. It is not known exactly which version Van Gogh was familiar with; see *Dieuwertje Dekkers in Van Tilborgh* 1993, pp. 78-79, no. 3.

<sup>2</sup> Van Gogh mentions this work in letter 278/R16.

<sup>3</sup> With reference to *The potato eaters*, Van Gogh wrote that he had his 'own way of seeing,' but that it was 'linked to others, for example, certain Belgians,' probably meaning *De Groux*; see letter 502/405.

<sup>4</sup> Van Gogh has certainly distorted reality, as we see when we compare the painting with a later photograph of the De Groot-Van Rooijen cottage (see fig. 26d). The roof beam runs from left to right in the painting, whereas in fact it was set at right angles.

<sup>5</sup> The tablecloth is described in letter 502/405.

<sup>6</sup> On the use of these prints see Charles de Mooij, 'Devotionalia en volkskunst,' in *Den Bosch* 1991-92, pp. 145-63, esp. pp. 147-48.

<sup>7</sup> The model is probably *Gordina de Groot*, the only identifiable figure in the painting. See cat. 12 and cat. 25, fn. 5.

<sup>8</sup> See Jozien Jobse-van Putten, *Eenvoudig maar voedzaam. Cultuurgeschiedenis van de dagelijkse maaltijd in Nederland*, Amsterdam 1995, p. 471. In the countryside tea was considered a luxury, while (chicory) coffee was an everyday beverage (see Thera Wijsenbeek, 'Bonenkoffie en surrogaten. Koffie thuis in de negentiende en twintigste eeuw,' in Pim Reinders et al., *Koffie in Nederland. Vier eeuwen cultuurgeschiedenis*, Delft 1994, p. 150).

<sup>9</sup> As payment for their services, Van Gogh often gave his models coffee, which he bought in Eindhoven (Stokvis 1927, p. 12).

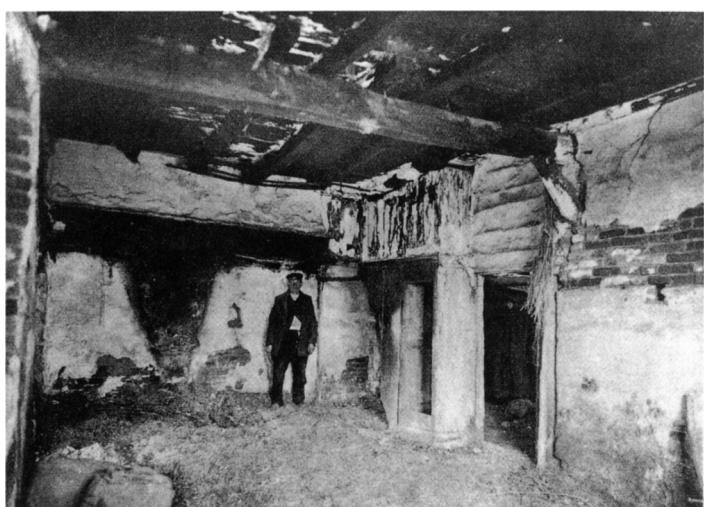
<sup>10</sup> On the various prints see *Sjraar van Heugten and Fieke Pabst, The graphic work of Vincent van Gogh*, Zwolle 1995, pp. 74-78, 97-98.

<sup>11</sup> Only two portraits have any resemblance to the people in the painting: F 130 JH 692 (cat. 12), in which the figure – 'Gordina de Groot' – is the same as the woman at the left; and F 160a JH 563, with the same old man seen here on the

In anticipation of the end result he made a few corrections to the study in the lithograph: for example, the woman at the right is now shown *en trois-quarts*, as in the painting.<sup>9</sup>

Van Gogh had executed the study in the De Groot-Van Rooijen cottage (fig. 26d); the final version, however, was done in the studio, at the home of the curate Schafrat. In his own words, Van Gogh painted the scene 'mainly from memory' [501/404], in order to prove – in the best academic tradition – that he not only had the talent to reproduce what he saw before him but also the gift of imagination. Nonetheless, he often returned to his models. Not only did he make new 'painted studies' of the faces, he also visited the family every evening 'to touch up odd bits on the spot' [500/403]. These painted works have probably been lost.<sup>10</sup> A number of the drawings, however, have survived, although only a few can truly be described as preliminary studies: three of hands, a drawing of the clock and the clog, and a sheet showing the background with the door.<sup>11</sup>

Painting the final version took 'several days' over a longer period of time, and appears to have been 'a tremendous struggle' [501/404]. For the underpainting Van Gogh used a dark, rather muddy, olive green.<sup>12</sup> This was then given a thin varnish, to prevent the binder used for the following layers from being absorbed into the ground and causing the paint to become dull. The artist then



<sup>26d</sup> Photograph of the De Groot-Van Rooijen cottage shortly before being demolished. Photograph from Stokvis 1926, p. 25.

worked up the scene from dark to light. Initially he found the faces too light in tone but, as he later wrote, he 'did not hesitate to paint them over, without mercy, and the colour in which they are now painted is the colour of a dusty potato, unpeeled, of course' [502/405].

With this painting, Van Gogh sought to demonstrate not only his mastery of chiaroscuro and tonal painting, but also of the laws of complementary colour, as set out in Charles Blanc's 1867 *Grammaire des arts du dessin, architecture, sculpture, peinture*. Guided by this treatise, he mixed his colours only from the three primaries.<sup>13</sup> He even followed Blanc's advice in the shadowed areas, giving them a deep tone. He intended to prove that 'one of the most wonderful things accomplished by painters this century has been: to paint DARKNESS that is nevertheless COLOUR' [499/402].

In contrast to the large study, Van Gogh has here made use of what Blanc called *ton rompu*, that is, mixtures of two complementary colours. Blending equal amounts produces grey; unequal combinations, however, result in coloured greys or broken colours. In *The potato eaters*, Van Gogh often enlivened these by juxtaposing them with their complementaries, for example, in the cap of the woman at the left he placed grey-pink next to grey-green (fig. 26e). In this way, he sought to make *The potato eaters* both a tonal painting and a colourful one.

In order to 'break' colours while still keeping them lively, Van Gogh also employed Blanc's theory of optical mixing. Here tones are broken by applying colours next to each other or even interweaving them, as Blanc illustrates (fig. 26f). Van Gogh believed his painting conformed to the Frenchman's method, and compared it

right. Both portraits, however, were painted earlier. The first was probably already in Theo's possession (see cat. 12) and the second was likely painted between December 1884 and January 1885 (see Van Heugten in Drawings 11, p. 130).

11 F 1229r JH 740; F 1161r JH 746; F 1157 JH 739 (which includes a sketch of the knob of the left-hand chair); F 1349r JH 731; and F 1161v JH 760 (in which there is also a small sketch after the painting). See Van Heugten in Drawings 11, nos. 141-48, pp. 157-63.

12 On the painting technique see Hummelen/Peres 1993, pp. 49-57, 65-69.

13 Ibid., pp. 59, 61 and 62.

14 According to Kerssemakers 1912, p. 6, Van Gogh had only brought the work with him to show him the results.

15 He had planned to use egg-white, but chose a resin varnish instead, as indicated by the analysis of paint samples. See letter 501/404 and Hummelen/Peres 1993, p. 53.

16 Letter 504/404. The plan to make a second lithograph is mentioned in letter 501/407.

17 Letter of 1912 from Anton Kerssemakers to Albert Plasschaert (inv. b 3038 V/1983).

18 See, among others, letters 505/408, 509/410 and 522/418.

19 See letter 508/R51

20 See cats. 10-18.

21 This anecdote originated with the French writer and critic Théophile Gautier and was cited in Alfred Sensier's Millet biography (1881), which Van Gogh had read; see Sensier 1881, p. 127.

22 This last sentence is also quoted in letters 499/402, 503/406 and 509/410.



26e Detail of cat. 26.

<sup>23</sup> See letter 865/629a and Van Heugten, 'The potato eaters revisited,' in *Van Tilborgh* 1993, pp. 108-10.

<sup>24</sup> Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, in the introduction to the 1953 edition of the collected letters, part 1, p. XLVII.

<sup>25</sup> V.W. van Gogh, 'Aesthetic exercise-III,' *Scottish Art Review* 2 (1949), no. 3, p. 13, and *idem*, 'J. van Gogh-Bonger,' in the 1953 edition of the collected letters, part 4, pp. 247-48.

<sup>26</sup> Johan van Gogh, 'The history of the collection,' in Amsterdam 1987, pp. 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> On the painting's reputation see Louis van Tilborgh, 'The potato eaters: Van Gogh's first attempt at a masterwork,' in *Van Tilborgh* 1993, pp. 27-29.

<sup>28</sup> J.W. van Dijckveldt, 'Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh,' *De Amsterdammer. Dagblad voor Nederland* (1-2 January 1893).

<sup>29</sup> C.S. Adama van Scheltema, *De grondslagen eener nieuwe poëzie. Proeve tot een maatschappelijke kunstleer tegenover het naturalisme en anarchisme, de Tachtigers en hun decadenten*, Rotterdam 1907, pp. 100-01.

<sup>30</sup> Just Havelaar, 'Vincent van Gogh,' *Onze eeuw* (1911), p. 318 and *idem*, *Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1915, p. 50.

<sup>31</sup> Van Gogh wrote this in reference to his portrait of Patience Escalier, an old goat-herder (F 444 JH 1563). He compared this work with his Nuenen heads and, indirectly, with The potato eaters.

<sup>32</sup> Another contributing factor was the use of copaiba balsam; see fn. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Hummelen/Peres 1993, pp. 55-56. Van Gogh also used copaiba balsam to deepen the colours, but because the balsam never completely dries the pigment eventually rose through the craquelure. The painting was relined in 1928 by J.C. Traas; at the same time, it was given another coat of varnish (see his bill to V.W. van Gogh, inv. b 4215 V/1962).

with 'colourful woven Scottish plaids,' where the aim was create 'unusual broken colours and greys,' or 'to achieve a balance between the brightest colours, so that the patterns don't clash but rather have a harmonious effect when seen from a distance' [501/404]. He described this effect – seen in *The potato eaters* – as 'intertwined' [501/404].

Shortly before it was completed, Van Gogh brought the painting to Anton Kerssemakers in Eindhoven. He wanted to 'finish a few details' but was afraid of ruining it by continuing to paint – something he hoped his friend could prevent [501/404].<sup>14</sup> The alterations were carried out over the new layer of varnish.<sup>15</sup> The artist then took the canvas back to Nuenen where, despite his fears of working it to death, he took up the brush once again. In order to make retouches 'after nature' he returned to the De Groot-Van Rooijen cottage [502/405], and it was here that the final corrections were made.

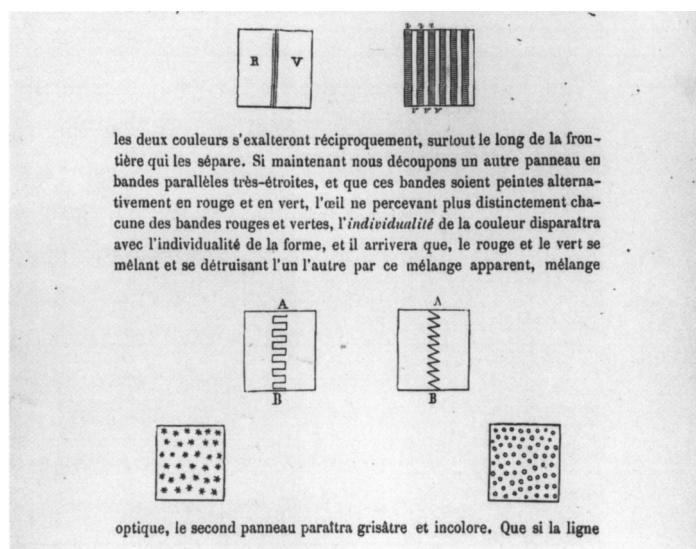
Among the changes resulting from these last two sessions were the addition of the blue highlights on the smock of the man at the left, and the grey touches around the head of the young girl in the foreground. The young woman's left cheek was reworked, as was the wall above the back of the man at the left. At this point Van Gogh also painted in the deepest tones, an unadulterated dark blue, such as we see in the shadowed areas of the hands.

Having now completed the painting, Van Gogh could no longer resist the urge to hear the opinion of others. He sent the barely-dry canvas to Theo in a flat crate at the beginning of May, abandoning the idea of making a lithograph after the finished work.<sup>16</sup> He suggested framing it in gold, but advised his brother to wait until he had several paintings of the same calibre. In the meantime, the picture could be hung against a paper background 'the colour of ripe wheat' [501/404]. This 'gold or copper colour' would reduce the marbled effect of the surface and would also go well with the dominant blue tones in the shadows.

According to Kerssemakers, Theo was impressed with the picture. He is supposed to have written to his brother that 'just by looking at the painting one could hear the clogs of the sitters clacking together.'<sup>17</sup> He also passed on the compliments of two other people he had shown the canvas: his neighbour, the art dealer Alphonse Portier (1841-1902), and Charles Serret (1824-1900), an older artist and friend. Like Theo, however, they were also critical: the heads were better than the torsos, and the overall coloration was too dark.<sup>18</sup>

Van Gogh agreed with them, but considered the praise (probably exaggerated by Theo) a confirmation of his as-yet immature but nonetheless promising artistry. He was thus bitterly disappointed when Anthon van Rappard wrote after seeing the lithograph that the 'work [was] not serious' [507/R51a]. His friend bluntly pointed out its many deficiencies: 'why haven't you studied the movements? Now they look posed. That ladylike hand of the woman at the back – how untrue! And what relationship is there between the coffee kettle, the table and the hand lying on top of the handle?' Deeply insulted, Van Gogh returned the letter.<sup>19</sup>

Van Gogh probably felt that Van Rappard had based his critique solely on the work's technical shortcomings and had neglected its social message. Although full of mistakes, he believed the painting would always have 'a certain life of its own and a *raison d'être* which will outweigh its errors – in the eyes of those who appreciate character and *allow themselves to be touched*' [529/R57]. The aim of the painting was to show the peasants in their most primitive and pure state. He saw their direct and uncomplicated relationship to nature reflected not only in their coarse, expressive hands and brutish, almost animal-like faces,<sup>20</sup> but also in their simple meal. He wrote to Theo: 'I wanted to convey the idea that these people eating their potatoes by the light of a lamp had used the same hands with which they now



26f Illustration from Blanc 1867, p. 605.

take food from the plate to work the land, that they have TOILED WITH THESE HANDS – and that they have earned their food honestly' [501/404].

Van Gogh had sought to stress this primitive element with colour. Inspired by Jean-François Millet, who was said to have painted his peasants the colour of the earth they sowed,<sup>21</sup> he chose an earthy palette to depict his characters and their surroundings. As already noted, he wanted them to be the colour of a dusty, unpeeled potato. 'While working on them,' he wrote, 'I could not help thinking of how apt that statement about Millet's peasants is – "Ses paysans semblent peints avec la terre qu'ils ensemencent"' [502/405].<sup>22</sup>

Although Van Gogh turned to a more colourful palette during his sojourn in Paris, he never repudiated his first – dark – masterpiece. 'What I think of my own work is that the painting of the peasants eating potatoes [...] is – après tout – the best I have ever done,' he wrote in 1887 [576/w1]. This assessment arose from his desire to make a career as a figure painter rather than a landscapist. On the other hand, he must have realised that his abilities were unequal to the task of creating multi-figured scenes. Never again was he to paint a large-scale composition with more than one figure. Only in 1889 did he briefly contemplate making a new, modern version of *The potato eaters*, but this never got beyond a few drawings of peasants at their meals.<sup>23</sup>

In accordance with the value Van Gogh himself had fixed on his painting, it was given a prominent place in Theo's Paris apartment: above the mantelpiece in the dining room, where every visitor was immediately confronted with it.<sup>24</sup> Later, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger gave it a similarly conspicuous location in her own homes,<sup>25</sup> and when her son moved into the house in Laren following her death in 1925 he, too, followed the family tradition and hung it above the fireplace in the living room.<sup>26</sup>

As the most ambitious painting of his Dutch period, Van Gogh's *Potato eaters* drew much attention after his death, the caricature-like portraits in particular.<sup>27</sup> In 1892 a Dutch critic referred to it as 'that morbid painting of faces with exaggerated, animal-like features and people of low degree.'<sup>28</sup> The heads even led some to accuse Van Gogh of cynicism. According to the poet C.S. Adama van Scheltma (1877-1924), he had depicted the peasants with 'black pig-snouts, bowing over their food' and as 'crazed animals,' and should therefore be 'whipped [...] for his contempt of his fellow creatures.'<sup>29</sup>

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Following the publication of Van Gogh's letters in 1914, when the artist's deep sympathy towards the peasant population became obvious, this negative assessment quickly turned into its opposite. If, in 1911, the critic Just Havelaar could still describe the portraits in *The potato eaters* as 'bestial and cynical [...], the most cruel derision imaginable,' after reading the letters he spoke of 'the most penetrating study of the proletariat ever painted,' calling the picture 'a moving representation of physical wretchedness.'<sup>30</sup> This view came to dominate many later evaluations, even leading to a negation of the coarse, distinctly animal aspects of the farm labourers and their life. This, of course, has done equally little justice to Van Gogh's aims, since it had always been his intention to show how much a peasant 'smells like a wild animal [...],' to quote a letter from 1888 [669/B15].<sup>31</sup>

The painting's appearance has changed considerably over time. Although Van Gogh was exaggerating when he stated in 1890 that he suspected that by now the picture 'must be quite black' [864/629], it has certainly darkened. The discoloured varnish has dulled the effect of the original colour contrasts and has made the whole seem greener than Van Gogh intended.<sup>32</sup> The surface has also become crusted in the shadows. The paint has coalesced into 'islands,' between which we find dry craquelure. This is probably due to the resin in the retouching varnish Van Gogh applied to preserve the depth – and thus the colour – of the dark passages.<sup>33</sup>

## 27 The cottage

MID-MAY 1885

Oil on canvas

65.7 × 79.3 cm

Signed at the lower left in brown: Vincent

Inv. s 87 V/1962

F 83 JH 777

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 × 14 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original  
tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, medium.  
Another image under the paint  
layer. Brush size: varying from  
narrow to extra wide. Varnished.

#### PROVENANCE

June 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-  
Bonger; 1916-19 on loan to the  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam;  
1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62  
on loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van  
Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on  
loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent  
loan to the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

#### LETTERS

505/408, 509/410, 510/411,  
514/414, 542/431, 864/629.

#### LITERATURE

Bremmer 1917, pp. 15-16,  
no. 10; De la Faille 1928, vol. 1,  
p. 34, vol. 2, pl. xxiv; Bremmer  
1930, pp. 26-27, no. 26; Vanbe-  
selaere 1937, pp. 297, 376-77,  
395-96, 414; De la Faille 1939,

When Vincent sent Theo *The potato eaters* at the beginning of May 1885 he also expressed his desire to paint new 'pictures of a certain format' [504/407]. Soon after he began work on *The cottage*. By 11 May – or shortly thereafter – he was busy with 'a large study of a cottage at twilight' [505/408].<sup>1</sup> He sent the picture to Theo in early June, together with *The old church tower at Nuenen* (cat. 28), which was executed right after it.<sup>2</sup> The two works have the same dimensions and Van Gogh later referred to them explicitly as 'paintings' rather than studies [510/411]. Like *The old church tower*, he gave *The cottage* a French title before shipping it to his brother – *La chaumière*.<sup>3</sup>

The painting depicts a type of Brabant cottage then on the verge of disappearing. It has a thatched roof and the chimney was probably made of planks. The walls of the house were built of various materials, the front of stone, the sides of clay; on the left we see that the corners were formed by wooden struts. As Van Gogh himself noted, the cottage actually consisted of two sets of living quarters, 'with a double hearth. Like you see around here often' [509/410].<sup>4</sup> The structure in the background is probably a barn. Near the left wall stands a kind of pillar, whose precise function is



<sup>27a</sup> St Oedenrode, postcard, c. 1913.  
Nuenen, J.C. Jegerring's photograph  
collection.



27 The cottage

p. 94, no. 93; Van Dantzig 1952, pp. 76-77; De la Faille 1970, pp. 70-71, 615; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 138-39, 320, no. 1.80; Amsterdam 1990, pp. 50-51, no. 9; Essen 1990, p. 72, no. 3; Van Heugten 1995, pp. 71-72; Hulsker 1996, pp. 174, 180, 194.

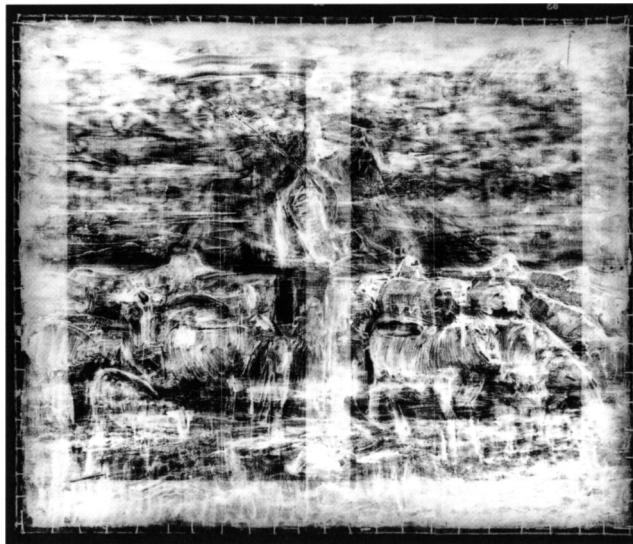
#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 16 [Dfl. 1,200]; 1911 Amsterdam, no. 6 [not for sale]; 1924 Amsterdam, no. 6; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 2; 1928 Berlin, no. 5; 1928 Frankfurt am Main, no. 2; 1928 Vienna, no. 2; 1929 Utrecht, no. 3 [not for sale]; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 14; 1945 Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1946-47 Liège, Brussels & Mons, no. 29; 1947 Paris, no. 29; 1947 Geneva, no. 29; 1947 Groningen, no. 9; 1948 Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 17; 1953 Zundert, no. 5; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 18; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 5; 1953 Assen, no. 5; 1953-54 Bergen op Zoom, no. 1; 1954-55 Bern, no. 6; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 43; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 16; 1956 Leeuwarden, no. 7; 1956 Breda, no. 86; 1957 Marseilles, no. 6; 1958 Paris, no. 39; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 9; 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 5; 1960-61 Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg & Toronto, no. 13; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 2; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 2; 1963 Humblebaek, no. 2; 1964 Washington & New York, no. 2; 1965 Charleroi & Ghent, no. 1; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 7, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 4; 1968 Baltimore, no. 67;

unclear. Weavers sometimes made use of posts for gluing and drying warp threads, and it is not impossible that this is one of them.<sup>5</sup>

The inhabitants – day labourers or weavers – were among the poorest in the community, but it was not so much their poverty that drew Van Gogh to the subject. He was more interested in the old, dilapidated cottage itself, which he considered an integral part of the ancient Brabant landscape (fig. 27a). ‘I was terribly moved by it, these two half-ruined huts under a single thatched roof reminded me of two decrepit old people – who are in fact one – and who you often see supporting each other’ [509/410].<sup>6</sup> The cottage reminded him of ‘a wren’s nest’ [510/411], his favourite kind.<sup>7</sup> On the left, a hearth fire shines through the window and this, together with the woman at the door, indicates that we are looking at a decaying but nonetheless inhabited ‘human nest.’

The x-ray reveals that Van Gogh painted the cottage over a scene of a shepherd with his flock (fig. 27b).<sup>8</sup> The legs of the sheep and the shepherd’s staff are still recognisable in the impasto (fig. 27c). Van Gogh used a yellow-brown paint for the initial lay-in of the first image. We find this same colour in the base layer at the periphery, and above the centre to the left and right. At the edges of the foreground on the lower left are traces of green-grey and bright red-orange, which were probably also used in the earlier picture.



27b X-ray of cat. 27.

The composition is reminiscent of analogous subjects by Constant Troyon (1810-1865) (fig. 27d) who, like Jean-François Millet and Anton Mauve, had a particular fondness for sheep. The picture may have been painted in the autumn of 1884, when Van Gogh carried out a similar work for the goldsmith Antoon Hermans.<sup>9</sup>

Vanbeselaere called *The cottage* ‘one of the most beautiful paintings of the Nuenen period’.<sup>10</sup> The primitive, run-down character of the dwelling is perfectly captured, but the real charm of the work lies in the rendition of the sunset breaking through the darkly clouded sky. The sky was probably painted over an underlayer of grey-green, and was executed before the cottage itself. The roof was done over a bright orange-pink, which is now visible through a crack. At the left, the band of light was originally somewhat broader, but was later narrowed along the underside using green-grey and blue. The thinly painted branches and leaves were among the last additions, as were the red and green touches in the foreground. The work appears to have been mounted on a larger stretcher at one time: the image ends half a centimetre before the edges all sides.<sup>11</sup>

It is not without a certain significance that Van Gogh chose the depiction of a cottage as the first work to send to Theo after *The potato eaters* (cat. 26). When, in early 1884, Theo had called his Drenthe ‘sod huts’ mere imitations of Georges Michel [434/358], Van Gogh had been deeply hurt and had immediately ceased his

1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 7; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 7; 1971-72 Paris, no. 6; 1972-73 Strasbourg & Bern, no. 2; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 132; 1990 Amsterdam, no. 9; 1990-91 Essen & Amsterdam, no. 3; 1997 Tokyo, no. 3; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 10.

<sup>1</sup> This letter consists of two parts, which should be dated differently; see cat. 28, fn. 4. The quotation cited here is from the first part, written on or soon after 11 May. The letter mentions the sale of building scrap from the Nuenen church in the fields, which took place on that day; see cat. 28, fn. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Letters 509/410 and 510/411.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> This segment of the letter was mistakenly left out of the edition of the correspondence published in 1990; it does, however, appear in the 1953 edition.

<sup>5</sup> With thanks to Gerard Rooijakkers.

<sup>6</sup> See fn. 4.

<sup>7</sup> See cats. 38 and 39. De Brouwer 1984, p. 86, claimed that the cottage depicted belonged to the De Groot-Van Rooten family (pp. 81-83), where Van Gogh had done his studies for *The potato eaters*. This seems unlikely, however, given his statement that he ‘was terribly moved by it,’ which indicates that it was a new discovery.

<sup>8</sup> See Van Heugten 1995. The existence of the underlying image was already noted by Van Uitert in Amsterdam 1987, p. 138.

<sup>9</sup> F 42 JH 517. Two other depictions of sheep herds and sheep were overpainted: cat. 32 and F 57 JH 539, while an extant portrait of a shepherd dates from the same period (cat. 35).

<sup>10</sup> Van Heugten 1995, p. 71, suggested the image under *The cottage* may have been painted in 1885, but given Van Gogh’s preoccupation with the subject in the autumn of 1884 this date seems more likely (see also the letter from Dimmen Gestel to Albert Plasschaert, 29 July 1912 [inv. b 3039 V/1983] and Stokvis 1926, p. 37). Van Heugten also believed that the picture had



27c Raking light photograph of cat. 27.

remained unfinished. The image in the x-ray appears sketchy, but this may also be due to a scraping down of the paint layer.

10 Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 395.

11 The picture was given a thoroughgoing treatment by J.C. Traas in 1930, but he did not replace the stretcher: according to his bill he only 'cleaned, relined and varnished' it (bill to V.W. van Gogh, inv. b 4207 V/1962).

12 Van Gogh's interest in cottages then waned. In April 1884 he did a large drawing of the motif (F 1343 JH 475) and in May a painting, which has not, however, survived (see letter 450/369). A study of hands from early 1885 (F 66 JH 743) is painted over a depiction of a cottage, but no other elaborations of the theme are known before the work here under discussion. (F 190 JH 492, which shows cottages at twilight, does not date from the summer of 1884 as Hulsker 1996 maintains, but from the autumn of the following year; see Van Heugten 1995, p. 70.)

13 For Theo's overture see letter 488/395.

14 F 1152v JH 665. Van Heugten, Drawings II, no. 156, pp. 178–79, erroneously claimed these were preparatory studies. The cottage shown does have two sets of living quarters, but the roof is different.

15 The watercolour is mentioned in letter 509/410, written when Van Gogh shipped the works.

16 Prior to these statements he had executed many drawings and several paintings in memory of his native countryside, including a 'souvenir of Brabant [with] cottages with moss roofs and copses of beech, on an autumn evening with a stormy sky, the sun setting among reddish clouds' (865/629a). The picture described is F 675 JH 1921; the other paintings are F 673 JH 1919 and F 674 JH 1920.

shipments of paintings to Paris (see cat. 5).<sup>12</sup> A year later Theo signalled that he would welcome his brother's work again, and Vincent appears to have wanted to convince him that he had been wrong on this issue all along.<sup>13</sup> *The cottage* marks the beginning of a series of paintings on the same motif. When he introduced his new variation to Theo in early June he made a point of referring to their past disagreement: 'you'll probably say: Michel imitations, although they aren't' [510/411].

It is unclear whether Van Gogh made preliminary studies for *The cottage*, as he did for *The old church tower* (cat. 28). There are two drawings of cottages from this period (on one sheet), but the houses depicted are not completely identical to the one in the painting.<sup>14</sup> He did make a watercolour of the subject, but as it is now lost it is impossible to determine if it was a preparatory sketch or not.<sup>15</sup>

As already noted, Van Gogh sent his brother the painting at the beginning of June; he asked Theo to varnish it, along with *The old church tower* [510/411]. By the end of the month he had heard nothing, and wrote to both inquire about the pictures and to impress upon Theo the need to give them a protective coating to prevent them



27d Adolphe Lalauze after Constant Troyon, *Shepherd*, from: Galerie Durand-Ruel. Recueil d'estampes gravées à l'eau-forte, Paris & London 1873, no. 286.

from becoming dull: 'They are both dry enough for a little varnish and *definitely* need it as there is something else under each of them' [514/414]. Whether or not Theo followed his advice is unknown.

Just before posting the shipment Van Gogh wrote that he intended to 'repeat that painting of the cottage' [509/410], but although he made numerous pictures of similar dwellings in the months that followed he never did one of the same size of this particular house. We do find it again, however, in a small study from the summer (fig. 27e); unlike the Van Gogh Museum's painting here there is a tree in the foreground.

Van Gogh maintained his fondness for this motif throughout his career. In 1888 he depicted the cottages at St-Maries-de-la-Mer, but in Saint-Rémy he was forced to do without them. He missed 'the mossy roofs of the barns and cottages that you find at home,' he wrote to his mother [787/598]. Overcome by melancholy and a longing for the north he contemplated painting not only another version of *The old church tower* (cat. 28) but of *The cottage* as well. 'If you still have them, I think I could do something even better now from memory,' he wrote to Theo at the end of April 1890 [864/629].<sup>16</sup> Nothing ever came of this plan, but – characteristically – he painted several pictures of cottages in Auvers-sur-Oise, where he moved a short time later.



27e *The cottage* (F 92a JH 806), 1885.  
Private collection.

## 28 The old church tower at Nuenen (‘The peasants’ churchyard’)

LATE MAY-EARLY JUNE 1885

Oil on canvas

65.0 x 80.0 cm

Signed at the lower right in dark red-brown: Vincent

Inv. s 2 V/1962

F 84 JH 772

### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 x 14 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, medium.  
Brush size: varying from extra narrow to wide. Varnished.  
Details: fingerprint.

### PROVENANCE

June 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger;  
1916-19 on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; 1925-62  
V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

### LETTERS

505/408, 510/411, 514/414,  
542/431, 864/629, 883/W22.

### LITERATURE

Bremmer 1917, pp. 19-20, no. 13;  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 34,  
vol. 2, pl. xxiv; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 297-98, 354, 377, 395,  
401, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 94,  
no. 94; De la Faille 1970, pp. 71,

*The old church tower at Nuenen* was painted shortly after *The cottage* (cat. 27). Along with the slightly earlier *Potato eaters* it is one of Van Gogh’s first mature paintings, works with which he hoped to gain recognition from Theo and other Parisian art dealers. It depicts an old tower and churchyard in the fields outside Nuenen – the only remnants of a 12th-century building that had collapsed in 1792.<sup>1</sup> Although there were still burials in the cemetery, by 1885 the tower had long since served its purpose. There had been plans to tear it down for some time, and work was finally begun in May 1885. The first sale of building scrap took place on 11 May, and this appears to have inspired Van Gogh to capture the half-destroyed church on canvas.<sup>2</sup>

His first exploration of the motif consisted of three water-colours. He sponged out the first two; the third – lost – sheet probably suffered the same fate.<sup>3</sup> The following attempt was this painting, which must have been begun at the end of May, before the building was completely demolished. ‘The old church tower will be pulled down next week! The spire is already gone – I’m working on a painting of it,’ he wrote at the beginning of June [505/408].<sup>4</sup> Again the results were unsatisfactory; as we know from a later letter, Van Gogh scraped off what he had done and began anew. He had originally sought to capture a particular light effect, as in *The cottage* (cat. 27) and *The potato eaters*, but now abandoned the idea: ‘At first I completely failed – then I made short work of it and started all over again; I went to sit on the other side and painted in the morning, early, rather than at dusk’ [510/411].

Like the old cottage, the tower and churchyard, too, were part of the primitive country world Van Gogh sought to capture in Nuenen. He had become interested in the subject while still living in The Hague. His parents had moved from Etten to Nuenen in 1882, and in a letter Theo had described the environs to him, including, specifically, the church and cemetery. ‘I’m very interested in what you’ve told me about their new surroundings,’ Van Gogh wrote in May 1882. ‘I would certainly like to make an

old church & burial ground, with its sandy graves and old wooden crosses' [259/226]. The motif, apparently recommended by Theo, began to haunt him. He even contemplated giving the scene a more specific and deeper meaning, thinking of depicting a peasant funeral.<sup>5</sup>

Although some scholars have sought to associate this interest in village churches and graveyards with the work of Caspar David Friedrich (1774-1840), there can be no question that Van Gogh's enthusiasm for the subject was inspired by French not German examples.<sup>6</sup> Foremost among these was certainly Jean-François Millet's *Church at Gréville* of 1871-74 (fig. 28a), which shows a Romanesque church from the painter's native Normandy.<sup>7</sup> This canvas, bought by the French State in 1875 and on view at the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris, was one of the few Millet paintings Van Gogh knew first hand.<sup>8</sup>

He was thus taken with the idea of depicting – like Millet – a village church and cemetery from around his family home already in The Hague. He began to realise his plan in 1883, when he moved in with his parents in Nuenen.<sup>9</sup> In the course of more than a year he made many studies of the old tower, six of them in oil.<sup>10</sup> The first painting, executed in February 1884, was originally destined for Theo (fig. 28b), but due to his negative comments on the pictures from Drenthe it was never sent.<sup>11</sup> Theo's critique had hurt him so deeply that he ceased dispatching him works altogether. The brothers only made up at the end of March 1885, and Van Gogh promised to send him new works as soon as possible. He apparently remembered his old idea, and thought to include a painting of the tower in the first shipment. 'The weather has gotten rougher again here. As soon as we have a few nice days I'll do something on the churchyard' [492/397].

This project was not immediately carried out; only in May, when the tower was about to be demolished, did he finally set to work. In contrast to the earlier oil studies, Van Gogh now depicted the church from close by and, initially, from the southeast. This did not go well, and he soon returned to the vantage point taken in the studies: a view of the church from the northwest.<sup>12</sup>

It is still plain to see that Van Gogh began his painting again. There are traces of scraping in the sky and in the foreground, as seen in the x-ray (fig. 28c), and there are some

615; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 140-41, 320, no. 1.81; Amsterdam 1990, pp. 50-51, no. 8; Kôdera 1990, pp. 42-43; Glasgow 1990-91, p. 130, no. 21; Tokyo 1993, pp. 93-94, no. 3; Hulsker 1996, pp. 170, 172-73, 176, 194; Paris 1998-99, pp. 82-90, no. 38.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 25  
[Dfl. 1,200]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 11  
[Dfl. 1,200]; 1905 Leiden, no. 11;  
1906 Rotterdam, no. 10  
[Dfl. 1,200]; 1906 Middelburg,  
no catalogue [Dfl. 1,200]; 1914  
Mons, no. 91; 1923 Amsterdam,  
no. 118; 1924 Amsterdam, no. 5;  
1925 The Hague, no catalogue  
[not for sale]; 1926 Munich,  
no. 2074 (not for sale); 1931  
Amsterdam, no. 15; 1946 Maas-  
tricht & Heerlen, no. 19; 1946  
Stockholm, Gothenburg &  
Malmö, no. 13; 1946 Copenhagen,  
no. 12; 1946-47 Liège,  
Brussels & Mons, no. 28; 1947  
Paris, no. 28; 1947 Geneva,  
no. 28; 1947 Groningen, no. 10;  
1947-48 London, Birmingham &  
Glasgow, no. 7; 1948 Bergen &  
Oslo, no. 3; 1948-49 The Hague,  
no. 18; 1949 Middelburg, no. 3;  
1949-50 New York & Chicago,  
no. 8; 1950 Hilversum, no. 4;  
1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 3;  
1951 St. Rémy, no. 3; 1952  
Enschede, no. 4; 1952 Eind-  
hoven, no. 8; 1953 Zundert,  
no. 6; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 19;  
1953-54 Saint Louis, Philadel-  
phia & Toledo, no. 27; 1954-55  
Bern, no. 7; 1955 Antwerp 1,  
no. 44; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 17;  
1956 Leeuwarden, no. 6; 1958-  
59 San Francisco, Los Angeles,  
Portland & Seattle, no. 10;  
1960-61 Montreal, Ottawa,  
Winnipeg & Toronto, no. 14;  
1963 Humlebaek, no. 5; 1964  
Washington & New York, no. 5;  
1965 Nuenen, unnumbered;

1968-69 London, no. 41; 1971-72 Paris, no. 7; 1979 Seoul, no. 33; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 133; 1985-86 Tokyo & Nagoya, no. 41; 1986 Osaka, no. 1; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 79; 1988 Rome, no. 15; 1988-89 Amsterdam, no. 17; 1990 Amsterdam, no. 8; 1990-91 Glasgow, no. 21; 1991 Amsterdam, no. 37; 1993 Tokyo, no. 3; 1993-94 Melbourne & Brisbane, no. 31; 1998-99 Paris, no. 38.

<sup>1</sup> Originally the church had stood in the centre of the village, but during the late Middle Ages the inhabitants had moved to higher ground.

The tower, which would have been more expensive to rebuild than to pull down, had been partially restored in 1803; the choir was completely demolished. For the history of the church see Leurs/Tralbaut 1957, pp. 29-34, 60-63; De Brouwer 1984, pp. 87-89; and Ineke Pey, Herstel In Nieuwe Luister. Ideeen en praktijk van Overheid, Kerk en Architecten bij de restauratie van het middeleeuwse katholieke kerkgebouw in Zuid-Nederland (1796-1940), Nijmegen 1993, pp. 67-77.

<sup>2</sup> The village council had discussed the demolition several times, but an official decision was only taken on 20 February 1885. The first sale of scrap material was held on 11 May. Among the items on offer were part of the spire, indicating that it had been taken down some time before. I would like to thank Ton de Brouwer for all the information pertaining to the razing of the church; he was kind enough to supply me with his manuscript 'De oude toren en Van Gogh in Nuenen.' The church tower is shown for the first time without its spire in a drawing (F 1336 JH 767), which is a sketch for the large watercolour Sale of building scrap (F 1230 JH 770); see also Drawings 11, p. 187.

<sup>3</sup> Letter 505/408: 'I also had [...] another large watercolour of the churchyard, but so far it's been a failure. [...] I have just sponged out two, but I'm going to try again.'

<sup>4</sup> Letter 505/408 is comprised of two parts, which have always – mistakenly – been put

remnants of the original paint layer in the grass at the right. And, although the x-ray reveals little, the contour of the tower in the first version can still be discerned on the right side of the building, where the old paint was not entirely removed. The base coat for the sky was probably dark grey, over which Van Gogh applied a robust blue. He enlivened this with touches of white and more blue, creating the effect of a hazy sky with thin clouds. The church, which was painted before the sky, was also worked up in stages, as was the grass in the foreground. A few details were added in a second sitting. Among these were the brighter elements in the scene – the yellow and orange flowers and the light touches on the bricks of the front-facing buttress – and the darker accents: most of the wall clamps and the black birds in the sky. This was followed by the signature. The varnish has yellowed, leaving the sky bleaker than the artist intended.

There is a patch of sand depicted in the foreground at the left, where a piece of the somewhat decrepit wall surrounding the churchyard had fallen down – as we see in the earlier studies.<sup>13</sup> Van Gogh 'left out a few details' [510/411], as he wrote to his brother, but which exactly these were is unclear. One of them



28<sup>a</sup> Jean-François Millet, *Church at Gréville*, 1872-75. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.



28 The old church tower at Nuenen ('The peasants' churchyard')

together. The first was written shortly after 11 May; the second dates – as Roland Dorn demonstrates in Vienna 1996, p. 191 – from the beginning of June, in any case several days after 31 May. The quotation belongs to the second part. Theo already knew about the demolition of the tower (see the first segment of the letter), and it is thus somewhat strange that Van Gogh should mention it again with such emphasis in his letter of early June. He probably simply wanted to let Theo know that the body of the tower was now finally about to be destroyed. It is no longer possible, however, to determine the exact date on which this operation began. No stones were on offer at the first public sale, though there were at the second, which took place on 17 July.

<sup>5</sup> See letter 272/236. Although Van Gogh had already shown a certain interest in this theme during his religious phase (see Kôdera 1990, pp. 14, 67–68), he probably came to the idea through Gustave Courbet's Burial at Ornans (1849–50, Paris, Musée d'Orsay), which had

may have been the tree in the background, visible in one of the studies (fig. 28b). On the other hand, the artist may simply have meant that here – in contrast to the previous works – he had not included the church's wider surroundings (among them the cemetery wall in the foreground and the mortuary on the right), but only the ruin itself.

For Van Gogh the already half-destroyed church expresses had an unusual and very personal symbolism. He sought to convey the idea that although faith and religion may change, the life of the peasants always remained the same. In this way, he took up a position very much contrary to his parents' beliefs, as appears – indirectly – from his explanation of the picture: 'I wanted to say how that ruin shows that for centuries peasants have been laid to rest in the same fields in which they toil during their life – I wanted to express how perfectly simple death & burial is, as simple as the falling of autumn leaves – just some earth dug up – a little wooden cross. The fields around – they



28b *The old tower* (F 34 JH 459), 1884.

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.

make a final line against the horizon, where the grass of the churchyard ends – like a horizon of a sea. And now this ruin tells me how a creed and a religion have mouldered away, even though they were so well established – how, nevertheless, the life & death of the peasants is and remains the same: always sprouting and withering like the grass and the flowers that are growing in this graveyard. Les religions passent, Dieu demeure, as Victor Hugo – whom they've also just buried – once said' [510/411].<sup>14</sup> This 'also' naturally refers to his own father, who had been laid to rest in the same churchyard on 30 March. Van Gogh was apparently still arguing with him beyond the grave about the meaning and value of the Christian faith.<sup>15</sup>

Van Gogh intended to send a crate with his latest paintings to Theo at the beginning of June, but *The old church tower* was not among those mentioned in the artist's summary list.<sup>16</sup> He only decided to include it at the last minute, indicating that it had just been completed. Thinking that his brother would show it to his art-

been just donated to the French State in 1882; Vincent owned a print after it by Albert Bellanger (inv. t 70 V/1962). He drew a study of the funeral motif in Nuenen (F 1686 JH 431), but it was never further elaborated. On his yearning for the Nuenen churchyard see also letters 259/226, 270/234, 358/295 and 363/299. In 1883 he had expressed his admiration for Emile Zola's *La faute de l'abbé Mouret* (book one, chapter 5), with its 'description of a peasant cemetery and the deathbed and funeral of an old peasant, as beautiful as something by Millet' [361/R39]. See also Kôdera 1990, pp. 13, 67-68.

<sup>6</sup> Rosenblum 1975, pp. 73-74.

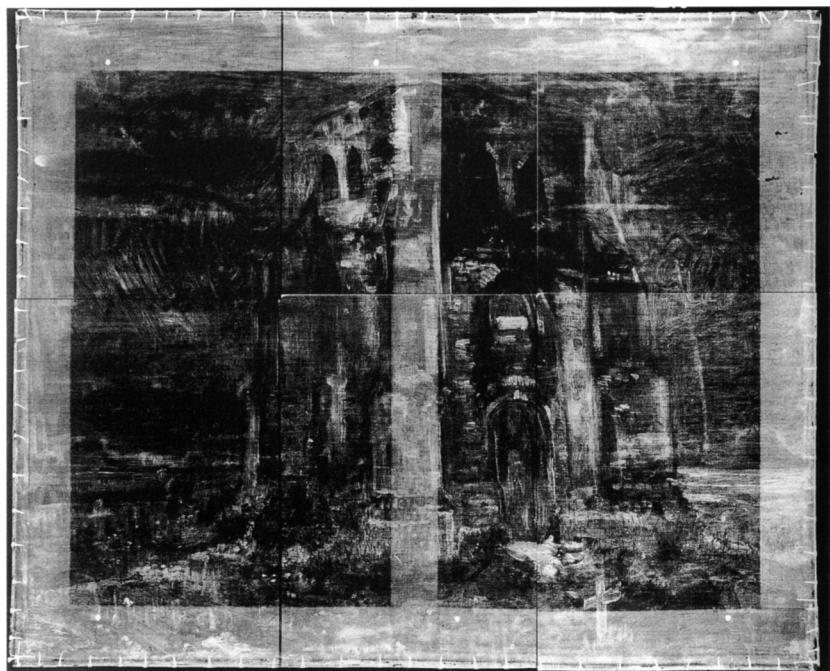
<sup>7</sup> Another example was perhaps Emile Breton's *Churchyard at Courrières* of 1879, a reproduction was in the brothers' collection (inv. t 69 V/1962).

<sup>8</sup> Van Gogh mentions the work in letters 35/28, 54/42, 136/116, 407/340 and 503/406. He had read Sensier's biography of Millet in 1882, in which the picture is both described and illustrated (Sensier 1881, pp. 349-51). Here the author notes that the painting was executed in Millet's native Normandy in 1870-71. To the artist's surprise, life there had remained virtually unchanged, like 'something from the era of Breughel' (*ibid.*, pp. 333-41; the quotation is on p. 336). Van Gogh thus certainly regarded the picture as a symbol of country life unspoiled by modernity.

<sup>9</sup> In Drenthe he had painted a – now lost – picture of the churchyard at Rolde (see letter 390/325 and letter sketch F - JH 396). He was probably inspired by his friend Van Rappard, who had done several works on the subject (see letters 257/R11, 346/286 and Brouwer 1974, p. 83, no. 98). Van Gogh also made a drawing of the church in Zweeloo (F 877 JH 423), 'just like the church at Gréville in that painting by Millet in the Luxembourg' [407/340].

<sup>10</sup> The painted studies are F 34 JH 459; F 87 JH 600; F 88 JH 490; F 184 JH 458; and F 40 JH 507, in which the church is more staffage than subject. There is also another image of the tower under F 45 JH 959 (*Pien van der Werf, Materieel onderzoek van het populierenlaantje bij Nuenen in de herfst*, Groningen 1991, unpublished research paper, pp. 12, 17-18).

On the chronology of these pictures see Hulsker 1993, pp. 18-19, and for a summary of all the works in which the tower appears Leurs/Tralbaut 1957, pp. 34-60.



28c X-ray of cat. 28.

<sup>11</sup> See letter 444/363a, in which Van Gogh mentions 'the painted study of the old tower, which you had especially asked for back then.' This work is F 34 JH 459, later given to his neighbour Margot Begemann.

<sup>12</sup> See fn. 10.

<sup>13</sup> See especially F 34 JH 459 and F 88 JH 490.

<sup>14</sup> It is not entirely clear whether the poetic 'final line against the horizon [...] like a horizon of a sea' is really a reference to Millet's Church at Gréville (where the sea is visible in the background), as Griselda Pollock has claimed (Amsterdam 1980-81, p. 108). The source of the quotation from Victor Hugo, also cited in letter 295/253, has yet to be discovered.

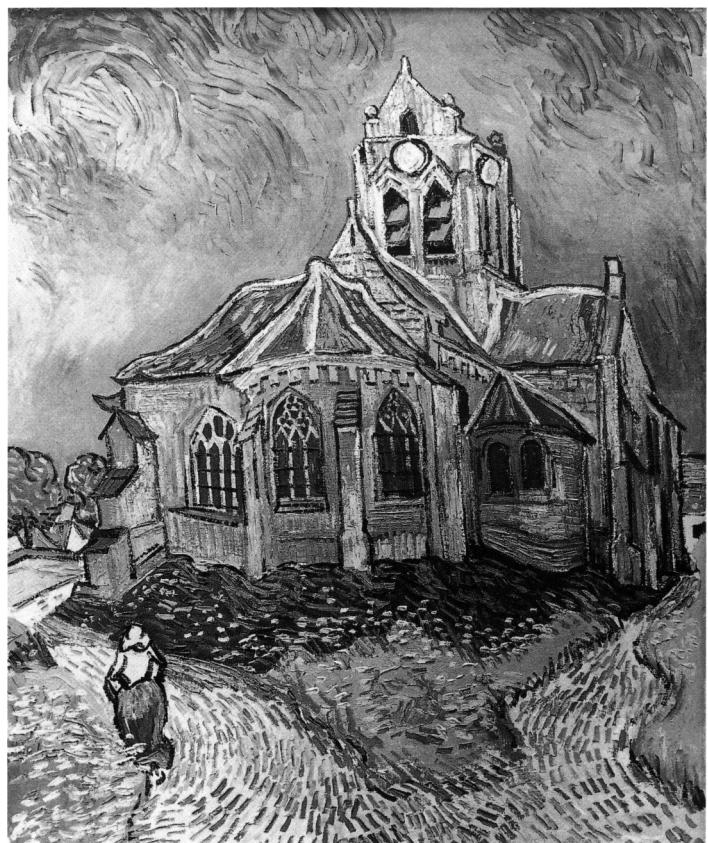
<sup>15</sup> The reverend was buried in the northern portion of the cemetery, which was reserved for members of the Protestant congregation. Catholics were buried in the southern section. Father Van Gogh's grave had a headstone rather than a wooden cross; see De Brouwer 1984, pp. 73, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Letter 509/410.

<sup>17</sup> This crate also contained The cottage (cat. 27). Hulsker 1996, pp. 176 and 178, erroneously suggests that the two works were shipped separately. Hulsker 1993, p. 37, also claims that the 'old tower' mentioned in letter 530/421 is the painting in the Van Gogh Museum, but this is a mistake. The work noted in letter 530/421 was intended for the Hague colourman Wilhelmus Johannes Leurs and, seeing as The old church tower was already with Theo in Paris, was certainly one of the remaining studies, probably F 88 JH 490, which is signed.

dealer friends, he gave it a French title, as he had done with *The cottage* (cat. 27): 'I have sent the crate today, containing 1 painting in addition to those I've already mentioned, *Cimetière des paysans*' [510/411].<sup>17</sup> 'Before you show them to Portier or Serret I'd very much like you to give both pictures a coat of varnish. The peasant churchyard in particular has become very dull, because it was very different at first and I had to scrape that all away' [510/411].

We do not know what Theo thought of the picture, but there is an imprint in the paint layer in the upper left corner, suggesting that he had it framed only shortly after its arrival. At the end of June, however, Vincent had still heard nothing from his brother about the work, and sought to force him into making some kind of comment, as well as indirectly inquiring about *The cottage* (cat. 27), which had been sent at the same time: 'Am I



28d *The church at Auvers-sur-Oise*  
(F 789 JH 2006), 1890. Paris, Musée d'Orsay.

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wrong in thinking that there's something good in the picture of the old tower? Have you varnished it yet? They are both dry enough for a little varnish and *definitely* need it as there is something else under each of them' [514/414].

After leaving the Netherlands Van Gogh lost interest in the country church; only at the end of his stay in Saint-Rémy did he return to the motif. As an extension of his campaign of copies after Millet he planned to make new versions of the pictures he had painted in Brabant, among them *The old church tower* and *The cottage* (cat. 27) – provided Theo approved. 'If you want I would [...] redo the Old tower at Nuenen and the Cottage,' he wrote at the end of April 1890 [864/629]. Nothing ever came of this, however, although it is striking that once he was in Auvers, he once again turned his attention to the local Romanesque church (fig. 28d). In contrast to Nuenen, the churchyard was situated elsewhere in the village; Van Gogh nonetheless saw a connection to the theme that had occupied him for so long in Brabant. 'It is almost like the studies I did in Nuenen of the old tower and the cemetery. Only now the colour is probably more expressive, more full,' he wrote to his sister Willemien [883/W22].

## 29 Woman lifting potatoes

LATE JULY-AUGUST 1885

Oil on canvas on panel  
41.8 × 32.5 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 452 S/1995  
F 147 JH 891

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 16 × 14 (fine) threads, medium weave, edges cropped, oak panel, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: varying from extra narrow to medium. Varnished. Details: weave imprints.

PROVENANCE

November 1885-86 A.C. van Gogh-Carbertus, Nuenen/Breda; 1886-1902 Schrauwen, Breda [?]; 1902 J.C. Couvreur, Breda [?]; 1902-03 W. van Bakel and C. Mouwen, Breda [?]; 1904?-1905 J. Smit, Alblaserdam; 1919-52 J.J. Enthoven, Voorburg/Woubrugge, auctioned Amsterdam (Mak), 10 February, lot 33, for Dfl. 3,100; 1952-? W. Brinkman, Schipluiden; ?-1994 M. Rehfisch, Amsterdam/Laren; 1995 bequeathed by Dr M. Rehfisch to the Dutch State, for placement in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. I, p. 49, vol. 2, pl. XLIII; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 304, 374, 393, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 144, no. 171; De la Faille 1970, pp. 90-91, 617;

By mid-July 1885 Van Gogh had painted 'six fairly large canvases,' among them *The potato eaters*, *The cottage* and *The old church tower at Nuenen* (cats. 26-28), and decided 'to do only small ones for the time being' [521/417].<sup>1</sup> These appear to have been figure studies, one of which is this *Woman lifting potatoes*. The works were chiefly meant as exercises in modelling. The criticism of *The potato eaters* had made Van Gogh aware of the stiffness and flatness of his figures, and he had tried to overcome this deficiency in 'the ensemble of the figure and the form' by drawing [512/413]. By July he apparently thought it was time to put his new skills to work in a painting. The drawings were meant for Theo, but Van Gogh eventually decided he 'needed [them] for painting. I shall want them for figures that are definitely not larger than a span, say, or even less – so that everything in them will become more concentrated' [521/417].<sup>2</sup>

A total of ten painted figure studies are known from this period.<sup>3</sup> Most of the men and women depicted are indeed about the size of a span – that is, around 20 centimetres.<sup>4</sup> There are surviving preparatory sketches for six of these works, but not for the Van Gogh Museum's *Woman lifting potatoes*.<sup>5</sup> However, her pose is more or less identical to that of a woman in another painting (fig. 29a), so we may assume both were based on a drawing that has now been lost.<sup>6</sup>



29a Women harvesting potatoes (F 96 JH 878), 1885. Private collection.



29 Woman lifting potatoes

Catalogue 1996, p. 199; Hulsker 1996, pp. 190, 192, 198-99; Van Tilborgh 1996, pp. 10-11.

EXHIBITION  
1904 Rotterdam, no. 23.

<sup>1</sup> He restates this intention in letter 529/R57, dating from the second half of August: 'I've mostly been working in a small format lately.' The other large canvases were probably F 91 JH 809, F 90 JH 823, F 170 JH 824; and F 1669 JH 825.

<sup>2</sup> This quote has been used – for example by Van Heugten in Drawings 11, pp. 222-23 – to demonstrate that Van Gogh planned to paint a large-scale picture of the wheat or potato harvest. Strictly speaking, however, there is no reason to draw this conclusion; he merely states that he needed his drawings as models for painted studies – and this is precisely what he used them for (see fns. 4 and 5).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the work discussed here these are: F 94 JH 893; F 95 JH 827; F 95a JH 899; F 96 JH 878; F 97 JH 876; F 98 JH 901; F 139 JH 905; F 148 JH 908; and F 166 JH 850.

<sup>4</sup> A 'span' is an old standard of measurement, calculated as the distance between the top of the thumb and the little finger of a spread hand. The figure in our painting and those in F 94 JH 893, F 95a JH 899, F 96 JH 878, F 97 JH 876, F 98 JH 901 and F 148 JH 908 are all about this size.

<sup>5</sup> These are F 94 JH 893 (based on F 1258 JH 892 or F 1256 JH 897); F 95 JH 827 (F 1255 JH 826); F 97 JH 876 (perhaps F 1295 JH 875); F 139 JH 905 (F 1277 JH 880); F 148 JH 908 (probably F 1279 JH 836) and F 166 JH 850 (F 1311 JH 848). See Heenk 1995, p. 126.

<sup>6</sup> The watercolour, F 1296 JH 877, which is identical to the scene in F 96 JH 878, is probably based on the same drawing. Van Tilborgh 1996 erroneously stated that the Woman lifting potatoes was painted in the open air.

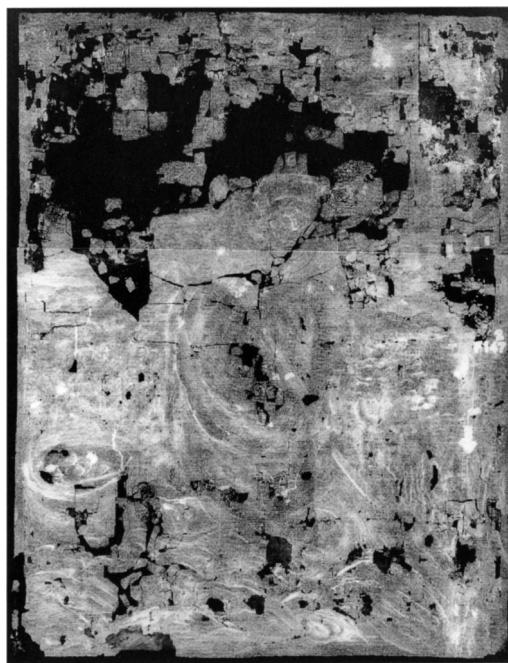
<sup>7</sup> These were F 1034 JH 372, F 9 JH 385 and F 41 JH 513.

<sup>8</sup> The edges are taped with three kinds of paper. The bottommost is red-brown and similar to that found on other works originating from the Kunstzalen Oldenzeel. The canvas was probably laid on panel before the gallery's exhibition

The theme of the potato harvest enjoyed a certain popularity among the painters of the Hague School. Undoubtedly influenced by the work of Anton Mauve (1838-1888) and David Adolph Constant Artz (1837-1890), Van Gogh had made several studies of the motif in both 1883 and 1884.<sup>7</sup> At the end of June 1885 he told Theo he intended to use the next harvest for a 'campaign' [514/414].

The painting depicts a woman lifting potatoes with a pronged fork; she is set against a cloudy sky, with only a tiny bit of blue peeking through. The work clearly demonstrates that Van Gogh no longer had any difficulty harmonising the major elements of the picture – sky, figure and foreground (see cat. 3). The gnarled woman's head is small, but her hands are large and her clogs positively enormous. As in the other paintings, the background has been kept simple; her pose still appears a little stiff.

The painting, executed wet-into-wet, is primarily a study in brown and blue. The former was used not only for the woman's clothing, but also for the shadows. The paint layer is not particularly impasted, only the highlights have been applied with a slightly thicker paint. The canvas is badly damaged, as the x-ray shows (fig. 29b). In some areas little more remains than small, loose pieces of fabric. This damage likely occurred when the canvas was trans-



29c X-ray of cat. 29.

ferred from an earlier support – probably cardboard – to today's panel, perhaps in 1902/3.<sup>8</sup> Weave imprints are visible in the upper parts of the paint layer. The painting may have been part of the shipment Van Gogh sent to the Hague colourman Wilhelmus Johannes Leurs at the end of August, which included several 'small figure[s]' [530/421].<sup>9</sup>

We can only roughly estimate the date of the *Woman lifting potatoes*. In mid-July Van Gogh had announced his intention to paint small figure studies,<sup>10</sup> and Theo saw 'the first' painted study of 'women harvesting potatoes' when he visited Nuenen in early August [530/421].<sup>11</sup> The picture was therefore probably executed after the middle of July, but certainly no later than the beginning of September, when Van Gogh turned his attention from the work in the fields to painting still lifes (*cats. 30-39*).

The painting was probably among those left with his mother when Van Gogh departed for Antwerp in late 1885. It was first exhibited in 1904 at the Kunstuilen Oldenzeel in Rotterdam, where it received some critical attention.<sup>12</sup> 'Who could help but think of Millet – that is: of a spirit closely linked to the great Barbizon master – when looking at the "Digging woman"?'<sup>13</sup> The picture was later bought by Jan Smit (1837-1918) of Albllasserdam, a shipowner who had a total of seven works by Van Gogh.<sup>14</sup> Following his death, the *Woman lifting potatoes* came into the hands of John James Enthoven (1885-1955), a land agent and manufacturer of electric motors.<sup>15</sup> The next owner was the artist and art dealer Willem Brinkman (1911-1983), who later sold it to Margot Rehfisch (1908-1994), a German-Jewish psychoanalyst who had fled her native country in the 1930s.<sup>16</sup> She went into hiding in the Netherlands during the Second World War; and as a token of her appreciation donated the painting to the Dutch State in 1995, to be put on display in the Van Gogh Museum.<sup>17</sup>

(for the provenance see fn. 12; for the treatment of works at Oldenzeel's see cat. 2). That the work once had a different backing was first noted in Catalogus van eene bekende en fraaie verzameling. Moderne schilderijen en eenige beeldhouwwerken [...] vormende eene particuliere, afgesloten collectie, Amsterdam (A. Mak Veilingmeesters), 10 February 1919, lot 33, although with no further description. Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 304, was the first to refer to it as canvas on panel.

9 See also letter 531/422, in which Van Gogh notes that he had shipped '7 paintings' and '12 smaller painted studies' The pictures were sent on commission, but nothing was sold; see letter 545/434. It is not clear from the correspondence whether or not the works were returned, but it seems likely.

10 Letter 521/417. The drawing on which the work is based was therefore probably executed before the end of the potato harvest (which ran from the beginning of August to the end of September). We know that Van Gogh had models pose as digging peasants in his studio; see Drawings 11, p. 203.

11 'I've painted three more studies of women harvesting potatoes, like the first one you've already seen.' We do not know precisely which works he is referring to here, nor when exactly Theo arrived in Nuenen. In a letter written from Nuenen to Andries Bonger in Amsterdam (inv. b 889 V/1962), dated 6 August 1885, Theo only mentions that he wants to be in the capital on Friday, 8 August.

12 On the provenance of the works shown at Oldenzeel's see cat. 1.

13 'Oldenzeel. Vincent van Gogh,' *Algemeen Handelsblad* (19 November 1904).

14 In addition to the *Woman lifting potatoes*, these were F 40 JH 507; F 67 JH 604; F 97 JH 876; F 186 JH 361; F 188 JH 413; and F 204 JH 190. The picture was auctioned at Mak's in Amsterdam for Dfl. 3,100; the limit was Dfl. 600; see 'Veiling-Mak,' *Algemeen Handelsblad* (11 February 1919) and annotations by M.E. Tralbaut in the auction catalogue now in the library of the Van Gogh Museum (T 1057).

15 Enthoven, the son of the famous Van Gogh collector Lodewijk Cornelis Enthoven (1854-1920), also bought a second work from the auction of Smit's estate: F 186 JH 361. For more information see P.H. Enthoven, *Kroniek van het geslacht Enthoven*, n.p. [Zutphen] 1991, pp. 82-83, 165-66.

16 She also had a number of drawings: F 1094 JH 398, F 1133 JH 485 and F 1676 JH 36.

17 With thanks to F. Westendorp.

## 30-34 Baskets of potatoes and baskets of apples

<sup>1</sup> See letter 538/427.

<sup>2</sup> The seven still lifes – six of baskets of potatoes and apples, and a bowl of pears – are cat. 30-34 and F 106 JH 936 and F 105 JH 926. Cat. 35 and F 59 JH 921 also belong to the series of tonal still lifes, but are discussed separately (see cat. 35). The eighth painting which may belong to this group, F 115 JH 935, has been discounted entirely. The style varies considerably from that of the other seven, and the composition and relationship of the apples to the basket, and of the objects to the picture plane, have nothing in common with the works examined here. Initially, yet another still life with a basket of apples was part of this group. Van Gogh was not happy with it, however, and reused the canvas for Cottages at dusk (fig. 30e). The Earthenware bowl with potatoes (F 118 JH 932), usually thought to belong to Van Gogh's Nuenen period, was actually painted in Paris, as indicated by both the style and the French stamp on the canvas.

<sup>3</sup> The seventh still life, F 106 JH 936, was never part of the family's collection and is now in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo.

<sup>4</sup> H.P. Bremmer, Moderne Kunstwerken 7 (1909), no. 2, cat. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Letter 535/424.

<sup>6</sup> This basket of apples is cat. 33.

<sup>7</sup> Inv. b 3055 V/1962: '2 Pommes de terre [cat. 32] // 8 Pommes de terre dans une corbeille [cat. 30] // 9 Poires [F 105 JH 926] // 10 Pommes [cat. 33] // 16<sup>ter</sup> Pommes de terre (15) [cat. 31].'

<sup>8</sup> We may conclude from Vincent's suggestion that Theo took the paintings to his wall with pins that they were not stretched before being sent; see letter 537/426.

<sup>9</sup> Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv.

Van Gogh's long series of drawn and painted figure studies came to an abrupt end in September 1885. In the months that followed, the artist devoted himself to still life, probably influenced by his reading of Félix Bracquemond's recently published treatise *Du dessin et de la couleur*, which Theo had sent him. This book had made Vincent intensely aware of the importance of colour theory in general, and he was particularly inspired by the author's suggestion that the artist 'regard drawing and colour as one.'<sup>1</sup> Given the flexibility of the genre, it was only natural that he turned to still life in order to study colour, hue and tone.

Van Gogh had already investigated the laws of contrasting colours in his series of still lifes painted between November 1884 and April 1885. Then, however, it was only one aspect among the many – proportion, form, perspective, chiaroscuro (see cat. 9) – he was trying to master. Now, under the spell of Bracquemond's book, he concentrated entirely on creating colour contrasts and on modelling objects not with line but with colour and tone. The still lifes are mainly executed in neutral brown-greys, achieved by mixing unequal amounts of complementary colours.

Although there is hardly any mention of this new project in the few extant letters from September 1885, one remark from the end of the month does give some indication of what he was up to. Van Gogh wrote that he had been working on 'a few still lifes – of a basket of potatoes, fruit, a brass cauldron, etc.' [535/424]. He does not give an exact number, but it seems likely – given their similarity in style, colour and the objects depicted – that the seven surviving still lifes of potatoes, apples, and pears belong to this group.<sup>2</sup> Five of these – three with baskets of potatoes and two with apples – are in the collection in the Van Gogh Museum. A sixth painting, *Bowl of pears* (fig. 30a), was also part of the family's collection, but was sold by Johanna van Gogh-Bonger in 1905.<sup>3</sup>



30 Basket of potatoes

b 4214 V/1962). V.W. van Gogh dated the bill 5 November 1927. It notes that Traas 'removed [the] paper' from a 'Basket with yellow apples.' This was probably a kind of thin cardboard.

10 Van Gogh writes that the works would 'become duller' ('inschieten') over time, meaning that they would lose some of their shine as the as the pigments sank into the ground. Varnishing makes the paint shiny again and gives the colours more depth.

11 See fn. 9. The basket of potatoes restored in 1927 was probably the largest of the three, namely number 32. The treatment cost Dfl. 40.-, while he charged only Dfl. 30.- for other two works.

12 Inv. b 4218 V/1962, undated bill from J.C. Traas. Two dates are noted in V.W. van Gogh's handwriting: 'Dec. '29' – probably the day the bill was received – and 'Rott. Bank 4 januari 1930,' the day it was paid. The restoration must therefore have taken place at the end of 1929.

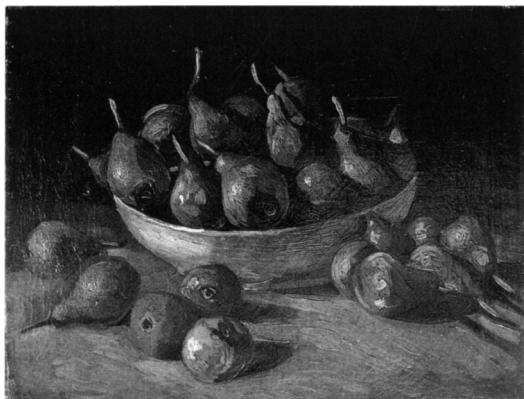
13 They were identified through study with the naked eye and under the microscope.

14 One of the loose potatoes is painted in red-orange. This colour is visible with the naked eye where some of the top layer of paint has been lost. With thanks to H. Kat, restorer at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

15 Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 398.

16 Van Heugten 1995, p. 70.

17 Ibid., p. 73.



30<sup>a</sup> *Bowl of pears* (F 105 JH 926), 1885. Utrecht, Centraal Museum, on loan from the Van Baaren Foundation.

Van Gogh said nothing about his choice of subject matter. But the rustic character of these particular fruits and vegetables, and the well-worn baskets, are no surprise in the œuvre of an artist who believed that peasant painting should smell 'of bacon, smoke and steaming potatoes' [501/404]. Moreover, the apple and potato harvests had just ended, so they were widely available. Given the tonal nature of the studies, their neutral colour may also have played a role. Van Gogh was certainly not the first artist to paint still lifes with baskets of fruit and vegetables. We find the motif in the work of French realists such as François Bonvin (1817-1887) (fig. 30b). Van Gogh must have seen any number of such pictures during his employment at Goupil's.

In his still lifes, Van Gogh sought to give his potatoes 'body [...] – I mean to express their materiality. They should be real lumps, which have a weight and solidity you would feel if, for example, you were to have them thrown at you – *enfin*, you just have to see for yourself' [536/425]. And he succeeded; H.P. Bremmer commented on number 32: 'And the potatoes, there is something monumental in them; they seem like fantastic cannonballs, or human heads that stare out at us.'<sup>4</sup>

The fact that Van Gogh had been more or less forced to stop painting figure pieces and focus his attention on still lifes did nothing to dampen his enthusiasm. At the beginning of October 1885 he wrote to Theo: 'As for my work, as I already told you I've been busy lately doing still lifes and I've enjoyed it greatly. I'll send you some. I know they will be hard to sell – but the exercise is devilishly useful and I'm going to keep it up during the winter' [536/425]. At the end of September he asked Theo to show the still lifes he had sent to the art dealer Portier; this is certainly an indication that he was pleased with the results.<sup>5</sup>

Although Van Gogh had announced that he planned to send Theo some of his pictures, lack of funds made this impossible. At the beginning of October – by this time Theo had sent him part of his monthly allowance – he restated his intention. In the end, however, he waited until after his trip to Amsterdam (see cat. 41). He reported to Theo: 'I've packed up various still lifes and you should get them next week; I've also included two souvenirs of Amsterdam, done in a hurry, and also a couple of drawings' [537/426]. The following letter began

with the almost telegraphic communiqué: 'I sent today – post-paid – crate V4 with the still lifes' [538/427].

Van Gogh does not mention exactly how many pictures he shipped, but the group can be pieced together. A reconstruction confirms the suspicion that the six works already mentioned and once in the family's collection were indeed among them.

An important piece of evidence is the discussion of several works in a letter from the second half of October 1885. Having received the crate, Theo had apparently made an incisive comment (in a letter that has since been lost) about the contrasting colours in a 'study of a basket of apples' [539/428].<sup>6</sup> Encouraged by his brother's trenchant remarks, Vincent went into some detail about the coloration of this and three other still lifes (*cats. 30-33*). Another clue is offered by the inventory compiled shortly after Van Gogh's death, which includes four still lifes with titles and other details.<sup>7</sup> The fifth was listed among the '20 études de Hollande (toile volante).' This annotation indicates that these canvases were not stretched, apparently in contrast to 18 others registered with number and title.<sup>8</sup> We know from the restorer J.C. Traas's bill that *Basket of apples* (*cat. 34*) was not stretched but rather marouflaged,<sup>9</sup> and the presence of a cardboard backing is confirmed by the diagonal cracks in the corners. These five pictures, plus *Bowl of pears*, were thus sent as a group to Paris; since this was the last shipment from Nuenen they were probably all in crate V4.

Before Van Gogh actually sent the still lifes he told Theo how he would like to see them treated: 'After a while they will probably become duller, but in a year's time they'll be better than they are now – when they have dried completely and been solidly varnished. If you were to tack up a bunch of my studies – all mixed together – both the earlier ones and these, I think you would see that they're all connected, and that the colours look good next to each other' [537/426].<sup>10</sup> We do not know if Theo followed Vincent's suggestion.

The Van Gogh Museum's five still lifes with potatoes and apples were all restored by Traas. He treated the two of apples (*cats. 33-34*) and one of the baskets of potatoes in 1927.<sup>11</sup> Two years later he worked on the remaining two potato still lifes.<sup>12</sup> He relined, cleaned, retouched and varnished all of them.

The paint in the five pictures is opaque, and they were executed mainly wet-into-wet; only a single detail was added later.



30<sup>b</sup> François Bonvin, *Basket of plums*, 1858. Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum.



31 Basket of potatoes



32 Baskets of potatoes

The paint layer in the fore- and background is smooth; the potatoes and apples are more impasted. This resulted not only of the use of thicker paint, but perhaps also from the very way they were painted. Van Gogh first laid them in using a muted tone, and then worked them up with coloured accents and contrasts of light and shade. In contrast to this building up in stages, the smoother areas are usually painted in a thin, generally darker coloured paint. All five still lifes are lit from the top left by a strong light source located outside the picture frame. This powerful one-sided lighting, with its accompanying cast shadows, helped Van Gogh create the illusion of perspective.

As already noted, Van Gogh explained the colour scheme of one of the baskets of apples in some detail. He also expounded on the use of colour in three other still lifes sent to his brother in October. ‘Further, that one of the studies appeared to you to be a variation on the brown/grey theme is quite correct, only its true of all three of the potato pictures – with the difference that one is a study in raw sienna, the other in burnt sienna, and the third in yellow and red ochres’ [539/428]. Careful examination has made it possible to determine in each case exactly which of the still lifes is meant.<sup>13</sup>

The study in raw sienna number 30. The ochre colour, although usually mixed with other paint, is most obvious in the lighter portions of the potatoes. The highlights on the left side of the basket are also done in shades of yellow, here tending more towards green. Van Gogh did not mix this particular colour himself; it came instead directly from the tube, as we see in the vertical canes of the reed basket. These are represented not by brushstrokes but by tiny drops of paint squeezed onto the canvas (fig. 30c). To contrast with this yellow-green, the right side of the basket was painted a complementary pinkish red. In the left background, the artist dug into the paint with the handle of his brush, probably to indicate the shape of another potato.

The still life is painted accurately and with verve. This is most clearly seen in the graceful, swerving brushstrokes used to depict the little potato in the foreground, just to the right of centre, and in the impasto highlights on some of the tubers in the basket. The potatoes are indeed nearly palpable ‘lumps’



30c Detail of cat. 30.

[536/425]. Thanks to the patch of light on the table behind the basket to the right there is a pronounced distinction between the fore- and background, giving the image a very convincing sense of depth. Such an explicit demarcation is highly unusual in Van Gogh's œuvre.

Number 31 is the aforementioned study in red-brown or burnt sienna. Here, too, Van Gogh succeeded in giving the potatoes real volume using only various tones of a single colour. For the background and a large portion of the table he employed a dark mixture, probably consisting of green, brown, black and blue. In the left foreground and to the right behind the basket, where a thin ray of light falls on the table, he used a dark green. As in number 30 he has clearly distinguished between the fore- and background.

This successful composition was mainly executed wet-into-wet. The only elements added later were the highlights on the uppermost potato in the basket and the stalks on some of the others. In this still life, too, the artist worked with the brush handle, particularly in the potato lying in the foremost foreground.

Although the x-ray reveals no underlying image, there actually was one. This is indicated by the 'islands' of paint under today's surface, clearly visible with both the naked eye and in the x-ray (fig. 30d). These probably consist of bits of paint left behind when the earlier picture was scraped away. The suspicion that Van Gogh initially used the canvas for another painting is confirmed by the odd colours – reddish pink, grey-green, emerald green, light blue and orange – found at the edges and in the cracks which have nothing to do with this tonal still life.

The third work mentioned in the letter, the study in yellow and red ochres, is *Baskets of potatoes* (cat. 32). Here, Van Gogh not only explicitly named the colours he had used, but also explained the various contrasts he had sought to achieve: 'the last, *in my opinion*, is the best, despite the mat black background – which I left mat on purpose because ochres, too, are naturally opaque. As for the study – the largest of potatoes – it was done by changing these opaque ochres, by "breaking" them with a transparent blue. Mixing red and yellow ochres to make orange and combining



33 Basket of apples



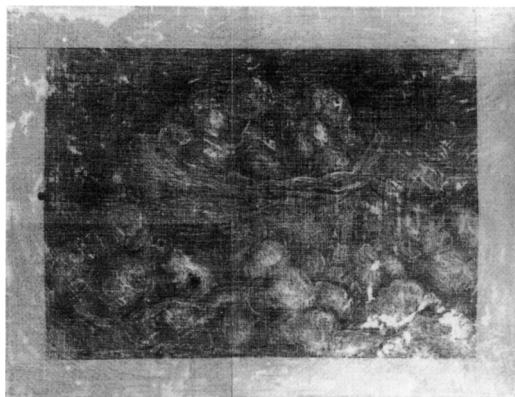
34 Basket of apples

them with blue is more neutral, and when seen against this neutralised colour they appear sometimes redder, sometimes more yellow. The highest light in the whole canvas is quite simply a pure yellow ochre. – and that *this* mat yellow still has an effect is due to the fact that it is placed in a field of kind of – neutral – violet, after all: red ochre with blue gives you shades of violet' [539/428].

This quote clearly indicates that Van Gogh had now fully grasped colour theory. After being laid in using olive green, all the potatoes were executed in a mixture of the three primary colours – red, yellow and blue. Since red and yellow make orange, their complement is blue. In some of the potatoes yellow is the dominant tone; the yellow-orange is 'broken' with blue to form yellow-green. In the other potatoes red is dominant, and here the orange-red is 'broken' to form a reddish brown. The colours thus achieved, yellow-green and red-brown, contrast with one another. Similar accents can be found in the two baskets.

The foreground is painted in the brownish green that characterises Van Gogh's Nuenen œuvre. This indeterminate shade was also achieved by mixing primary colours. As Van Gogh himself stated, the background is black. The presence of pure Prussian blue at the original tacking edges, where they flank the black background, indicates that the artist added this transparent blue to the black. The potatoes' shadows are also done in Prussian blue; they were added last and make the vegetables seem truly to rest on the table. The same colour was used to mark the border between the fore- and background to the right.

This colour may be the Prussian blue Van Gogh had ordered from Schönfeld in Düsseldorf, mentioned in a letter from the end of September. He bought a number of colours from this company that were unavailable in Brabant, and which he felt were necessary to achieve the proper effects: 'That the painting of the potato eaters is no good in terms of colour is partially the fault of the paint. I was reminded of this because I was painting a large still life in which I wanted to get the same tones; I wasn't happy with it, because the same thing kept happening, and so I redid it. And with this experience in mind I'm sure I would have gotten it much better this time using the mineral blue I have now than with the one I had then' [535/424].



30d X-ray of cat. 31.

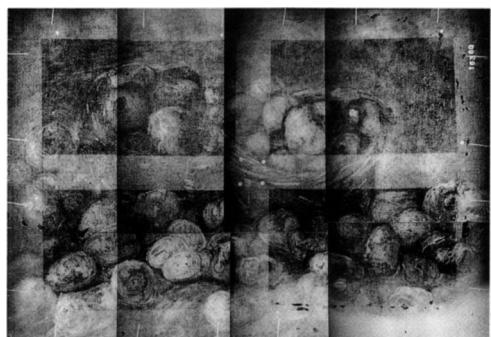
The picture painted using Schönfeld colours was probably the *Baskets of potatoes* described here. Assuming that this second attempt had more or less the same composition as the work he 'redid,' then the failed painting could very well be the still life with two baskets of potatoes found under *Cottages at dusk* (fig. 30e).<sup>14</sup>

In *Baskets of potatoes* Van Gogh depicted both of the baskets he had painted separately in the still lifes examined above. They are easily recognisable by the basketwork and the handle on the one to right. In all three still lifes with potatoes, Van Gogh convincingly reproduced the structure of the baskets; they even seem to have been 'woven again with the brush,' as Walther Vanbeselaere put it.<sup>15</sup>

Van Gogh was apparently satisfied with this work: he not only described it in detail to Theo, but it is also the only one of the five still lifes with baskets in the Van Gogh Museum to bear his signature. The artist wrote his name with a frayed brush on the lower left, initially in dark red. This probably turned out to be rather illegible against the darker ground, and was thus repainted in a brighter red (fig. 30f). The green of the table and the red of the signature have mixed, indicating that the canvas was still wet when he signed it.

Two earlier images were found under *Baskets of potatoes*. A quarter turn clockwise reveals a woman spinning or winding yarn, painted directly over the primer.<sup>16</sup> Turning the x-ray upside down we find a shepherd with his flock and a dog (fig. 30g). At the left edge, circa 12 cm from the top, is a patch of grey-green paint under the darker top layer, probably part of the field on which the sheep were grazing. Underneath, yet another layer is visible, this time in a grey-brown; this was originally the background of the woman spinning or winding yarn. At various intervals along the lower half of the still life we find thick white paint mixed with blue under the muddy green. This could have been a sky with clouds above the pastoral scene. To prevent these light colours from confusing him while painting the still life Van Gogh first gave them a darker coating.

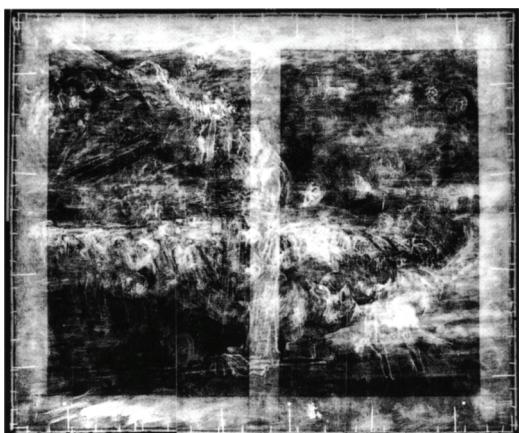
Unfortunately, we do not know what exactly Theo said about the colours in *Basket of apples* (cat. 33). His comments, however, appear to have been astute, and encouraged Vincent to reveal exactly



30e X-ray of *Cottages at dusk*  
(F 190 JH 492), 1885. Amsterdam,  
Rijksmuseum.



30f Detail of cat. 32.



30g X-ray of cat. 32.

which colour combinations and mixtures he had used. ‘As to how the study was painted – just like this: green and red are complementary. There is a certain pure bright red for the apples, then some greenish things. Now there are one or two apples in another colour, in a kind of pink – to improve the whole. The pink is the broken colour, created by mixing the first red and green mentioned. This is why there is a connection between the colours. Then I painted in a second contrast, in the back- and foreground. One was given a neutral colour by “breaking” blue with orange; the other the same neutral colour, only this time changed by adding a little yellow’ [539/428].

This description gives the impression that Van Gogh painted the fruit only in red, green and pink. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, he initially painted a still life that resembled the entire series in terms of tone and colour. The white highlights on the apples and the yellow-green accents on the basket were applied over the wet paint layer, and thus belong to this first phase. The contrasts were added only later, once the paint was dry: the bright red spots on some of the apples and the violet-pink at the edge of the basket. This pink, like the pink of the two apples in the artist’s description, is a mixture of red and green, probably with the addition of dark blue. Van Gogh’s remarks on the fore- and background, can be verified as well: in the latter we find tiny flecks of orange, visible under the microscope. The foreground, as he wrote, appears somewhat yellower.

In contrast to the other still lifes discussed above, the paint has been applied smoothly not only in the table and backdrop, but in the basket and the apples as well. The variation in surface structure is not a result of the more impasto technique, but of the fact that the paint used was simply less thinned. The only truly impasto elements are the white highlights on the apples (fig. 30h).

*Basket of apples* conceals another still life, namely the second version of the vase with honesty Van Gogh painted following the death of his father at the end of March 1885 (see cat. 8). The overpainted work can be seen in the x-ray and with the naked eye under raking light (figs. 30i and 30h). This still life, believed to be lost until 1994,<sup>17</sup> was described in a letter of 5 April, accompanied by a coloured sketch (fig. 8c):

'Here is a rough sketch [...] of a still life with honesty, of the same type as the one you took with you. It is, however, a little bigger. The objects in the foreground [are] a tobacco pouch and a pipe that belonged to Pa. If you want to have it, you certainly can' [493/398]. The artist was apparently dissatisfied with the composition and added several flowers to the left of the vase. He seems not to have felt this was an improvement and so chose to abandon the work entirely. Five months later he reused the canvas for the still life of apples.

The remnants of paint from this first image, still visible at the edges of the canvas, indicate that its palette was much more colourful than the first version, also in the Van Gogh Museum (cat. 8). The background to the left of the bouquet was a bright light blue; to the right a bright green. A little further down it was a brownish green. At the lower left we find traces of grey, running into grey-blue and pink at the edge (fig. 30j). Where the separate flowers lay, along the left edge about 10 cm from the bottom, are remains of bright orange and yellow paint.

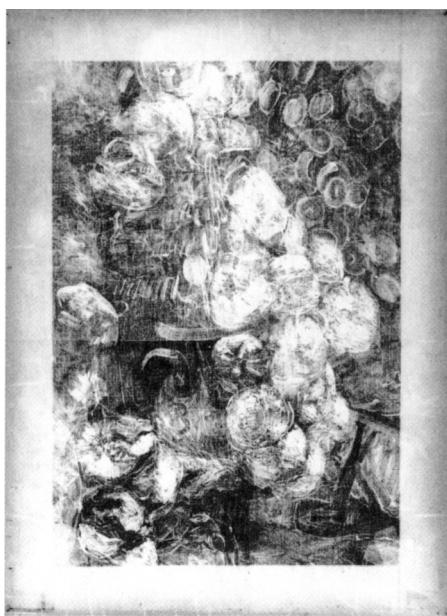
In his letter, Van Gogh makes no mention of the second still life of apples (cat. 34). Given the picture's weaknesses, this is perhaps not surprising. The basket appears lies awkwardly in picture plane and the foreground is too roughly painted for the format and composition. In the rest of the image Van Gogh thinned his paint considerably, with the result that the brushwork is barely visible, giving the whole a rather unarticulated feel. Neither the apples nor the basket have been worked up, remaining in the sketch stage.

*Basket of apples* is the only still life viewed from above. The perspective was a new challenge for Van Gogh, and one he apparently could not completely meet. The fruit in the background to the left does not rest on the table but seems to float above it. The chiaroscuro effects are also unresolved: there are shadows to both the left and right of the basket, although the light clearly comes from only one side, namely from the front left. All this may have contributed to the fact that of the six still lifes sent to Theo in October only this one was not stretched.

The picture is painted in yellow, brown-red and dirty green earth tones; as in the other still lifes these were probably created by mixing primary colours. On the left edge of the basket we find a colour accent, an orangey, warm red earth tone



30<sup>h</sup> Raking light photograph of cat. 33.

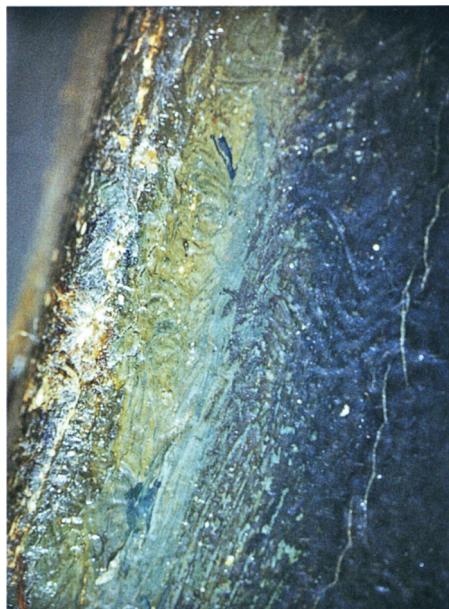


30<sup>i</sup> X-ray of cat. 33.

that contrasts with the blue-green next to it and makes the basket seem to project slightly forward.

This is one of the few works from Van Gogh's Nuenen period that appears to have been primed by hand rather than commercially. This is evidenced by the barb, the thick edge created when the priming brush is pulled from the canvas.

There are grey-pink fragments of paint on all sides of the canvas; these come from the primer on the back. Like the six double-sided canvases (*cats. 9, 16-18, 25, 38*), Van Gogh covered the back of this still life with pink when he was in Paris, indicating that he intended to paint this side as well. Nothing ever came of this, however, and the verso of the original canvas – now hidden under the relining – is a uniform greyish pink (*fig. 30k*). Pink spots unrelated to the image are also visible on the still life's paint layer; these come from the pink verso of another canvas which was once laid against it.



30i Detail of cat. 33.



30k Window cut into lining, verso of cat. 34.

### 30 Basket of potatoes

SEPTEMBER 1885

Oil on canvas

45.0 x 60.5 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 153 V/1962

F 100 JH 931

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 x 16 (thick) threads, densely woven, original tacking edges, wax resin lining. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Brush size: varying from very narrow to wide, brush handle used, paint applied directly from the tube. Varnished.

#### PROVENANCE

October 1885-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LETTERS

537/426, 538/427, 539/428.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 38, vol. 2, pl. xxvii; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 301, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 104, no. 110; De la Faille 1970, pp. 78, 615; Amsterdam 1987, p. 321, no. 1.87; Hulsker 1996, pp. 198, 204-05.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 22 [Dfl. 750]; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 7; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 21; 1954 Zürich, no. 7; 1954-55 Bern, no. 8; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 58; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 29; 1958 Mons, no. 6; 1958-59 San Francisco,

Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 3; 1960-61 Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg & Toronto, no. 16; 1961-62 Melbourne, Launceston, Sydney & Adelaide, no. 20; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 8, no cat. known; 1996 Vienna, no. 81; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 9.

### 31 Basket of potatoes

SEPTEMBER 1885

Oil on canvas

50.8 x 66.0 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 152 V/1962

F 116 JH 934

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 13 x 16 (medium) threads, medium weave, original tacking edges, wax resin lining. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thin. Another image under the paint layer. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide, brush handle used. Varnished.

#### PROVENANCE

October 1885-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LETTERS

537/426, 538/427, 539/428.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 42, vol. 2, pl. xxx; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 302, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 109, no. 119; De la Faille 1970, pp. 82, 616; Amsterdam 1987, p. 321, no. 1.91; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 233-35, no. 96;

Feilchenfeldt 1988, p. 83;

Hulsker 1996, pp. 198, 206.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1932 Cologne, no cat. known; 1932 Manchester, no. 5; 1935 Den Bosch, no. 36; 1938 Batavia, no. 39; 1939 Surabaya, no. 2; 1939 Bandung, no. 39; 1939 San Francisco, no. 169 (incorrect info.); 1940 Cleveland, no. 19 (incorrect info.); 1940 Cambridge & New Haven, no catalogue; 1940 New York, no. 1; 1941 Boston, no cat. known; 1942 Baltimore & Worcester, no. 1; 1942 Providence, no cat. known; 1943 Albany, Pittsburgh & Toledo, no. 1.G; 1943 Northampton, Philadelphia & Montgomery, resp. no cat. known, no. 1.G, no cat. known; 1943 Saint Louis, no. 1.G; 1943 Springfield, no cat. known; 1943 New York, no. 3; 1943-44 Indianapolis, Cincinnati & Ottawa, no. 1.G; 1944 Montreal, no. 115; 1944 Fort Wayne, no. 1.G; 1944 New York, no. 1.G; 1944 Richmond, no catalogue; 1944 Charleston, no. 1.G; 1944 Atlanta, no cat. known; 1945 New Orleans, Louisville & Syracuse, resp. no cat. known, no. 1.G, no catalogue; 1945 Toronto & Quebec, resp. no cat. known, no. unknown; 1945 New York, no catalogue; 1947 Groningen, no. 13; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 26; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 32; 1955 Antwerp 11, no. 18; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 96; 1988 Rome, no. 17.

### 32 Baskets of potatoes

SEPTEMBER 1885

Oil on canvas

65.0 x 78.5 cm

Signed at the lower left in bright red on dark red: Vincent Inv. s 154 V/1962 F 107 JH 933

**TECHNICAL DATA**

Canvas, 17 x 14 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original  
tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, thick.  
Two other images under the  
paint layer. Brush size: narrow  
and medium. Varnished.

**PROVENANCE**

October 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-  
Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh;  
1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1962  
Vincent van Gogh Foundation;  
1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on  
permanent loan to the Van Gogh  
Museum, Amsterdam.

**LETTERS**

536/426, 537/426, 538/427,  
539/428.

**LITERATURE**

Bremmer 1909, no. 9;  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 39,  
vol. 2, pl. xxvii; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 302, 397-98, 415;  
De la Faille 1939, p. 110, no. 122;  
De la Faille 1970, pp. 80, 615;  
Amsterdam 1987, p. 321,  
no. 1.90; Feilchenfeldt 1988,  
p. 83; Van Heugten 1995, p. 70;  
Hulsker 1996, pp. 198, 206.

**EXHIBITIONS**

1905 Amsterdam, no. 20  
[Dfl. 1,000]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 9  
[Dfl. 1,000]; 1905 Leiden, no. 9;  
1906 Rotterdam, no. 8  
[Dfl. 1,000]; 1906 Middelburg,  
no catalogue [Dfl. 1,000]; 1908  
Berlin 1, no. 2 [Dfl. 2,200];  
1908 Dresden, ex catalogue  
[Dfl. 2,200]; 1908 Frankfurt,  
no. 4; 1908 The Hague &  
Amsterdam, resp. no cat.  
known, no. 5; 1908 Berlin 11,  
no cat. known [Dfl. 2,600];  
1908 Berlin III, no. 33; 1911

Amsterdam, no. 5 [Dfl. 4,000];  
1914 Antwerp, no. 9; 1914  
Berlin, no. 5; 1914 Cologne &  
Hamburg, no cat. known; 1924  
Amsterdam, no. 4; 1929  
Utrecht, no. 5? [not for sale];  
1931 Amsterdam, no. 16; 1937  
Paris, no. 25; 1937 Oslo, no. 2;  
1938 Copenhagen, no. 4; 1946-  
47 Liège, Brussels & Mons,  
no. 30; 1947 Paris, no. 30; 1947  
Geneva, no. 30; 1948-49  
The Hague, no. 24; 1949  
Middelburg, no. 4; 1949-50  
New York & Chicago, no. 9;  
1953 The Hague, no. 39; 1953  
Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 28;  
1957-58 Leiden & Schiedam,  
no. 5 (incorrect info.); 1958  
Deventer, no. 5; 1960 Cuesmes,  
no. 4.

**33 Basket of apples**

**SEPTEMBER 1885**  
Oil on canvas  
45.0 x 60.4 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 151 V/1962  
F 99 JH 930

**TECHNICAL DATA**

Canvas, 16 x 14 (fine) threads,  
medium weave, original tacking  
edges, wax resin lining. Cream-  
coloured ground, commercially  
primed, medium. Another  
image under the paint layer.  
Brush size: varying from very  
narrow to medium. Varnished.

**PROVENANCE**

October 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-  
Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh;  
1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1962  
Vincent van Gogh Foundation;  
1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk  
Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on  
permanent loan to the Van Gogh  
Museum, Amsterdam.

**LETTERS**

537/426, 538/427, 539/428.

**LITERATURE**

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 38,  
vol. 2, pl. xxvii; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 301, 415; De la Faille  
1939, p. 105, no. 112; De la Faille  
1970, pp. 78, 615; Amsterdam  
1987, p. 321, no. 1.86; Feilchen-  
feldt 1988, p. 83; Heijbroek/  
Wouthuysen 1993, p. 192;  
Van Heugten 1995, pp. 62, 73;  
Hulsker 1996, pp. 198, 204-05.

**EXHIBITIONS**

1905 Amsterdam, no. 21  
[Dfl. 800]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 10  
[Dfl. 800]; 1905 Leiden, no. 10;  
1906 Rotterdam, no. 9  
[Dfl. 800]; 1906 Middelburg,  
no catalogue [Dfl. 800]; 1908  
Paris, no. 5 [FF 2,520]; 1908  
Berlin 1, no. 3 [Dfl. 1,200]; 1908  
Dresden, ex catalogue  
[Dfl. 1,200]; 1908 Frankfurt,  
no. 5; 1908 Zürich, no. 2; 1908  
The Hague & Amsterdam, resp.  
no cat. known, no. 4; 1908  
Berlin 11, no cat. known  
[Dfl. 2,200]; 1924 Amsterdam,  
no. 7; 1929 Utrecht, no. 4  
[not for sale]; 1931 Amsterdam,  
no. 6; 1948-49 The Hague,  
no. 20; 1955 Antwerp II, no. 19;  
1955 Amsterdam, no. 33; 1957  
Nuenen, no catalogue; 1984  
Nuenen, unnumbered; 1998-99  
Enschede, no catalogue.

**34 Basket of apples**

**SEPTEMBER 1885**  
Oil on canvas  
33.5 x 44.0 cm  
Unsigned  
Inv. s 150 V/1962  
F 101 JH 927

**TECHNICAL DATA**

Canvas, 17 x 14 (fine) threads,  
open weave, edges cropped, wax  
resin lining, formerly canvas on

---

cardboard/paper. Cream-coloured ground, hand primed (?), thick. Brush size: varying from narrow to very wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, transferred paint, grey-pink paint along the edges of the canvas, pinhole, grey-pink ground on the verso.

**PROVENANCE**

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

**LITERATURE**

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 38, vol. 2, pl. xxvii; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 301, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 106, no. 113; De la Faille 1970, pp. 78-79, 615; Amsterdam 1987, p. 321, no. 1.88; Hulsker 1996, pp. 198, 204-05.

**EXHIBITIONS**

1910 Berlin, no. 8 [DM 2,000]; 1911 Frankfurt, no cat. known; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 8; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 22; 1957-58 Stockholm, no. 103, Luleå, Kiruna, Umeå, Östersund, Sandviken & Gothenburg, no cat. known; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 2; 1961 Humlebaek, no. 73; 1961-62 Stockholm, no. 38; 1968-69 London, no. 50.

## 35 Still life with brass cauldron and jug

SEPTEMBER 1885

Oil on canvas  
65.5 × 80.5 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 52 V/1963  
F 51 JH 925

TECHNICAL DATA  
Canvas, 18 × 14 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original  
tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, thickness  
unknown. Another image under  
the paint layer. Brush size:  
small and medium. Varnished.

PROVENANCE  
October 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-  
Bonger; 1925-? V.W. van Gogh;  
?-1963 Theo van Gogh Founda-  
tion; 1963 Vincent van Gogh  
Foundation; 1931-73 on loan to  
the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent  
loan to the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

LETTER  
535/424.

LITERATURE  
Meier-Graefe 1910, pp. 11-14;  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 25,  
vol. 2, pl. xiv; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 301, 330, 346-47, 414;  
De la Faille 1939, p. 68, no. 55;  
Tralbaut 1955, pp. 5, 17, 35;  
De la Faille 1970, pp. 62, 613;  
Amsterdam 1987, p. 320,  
no. 1.85; Feilchenfeldt 1988,  
p. 83; Essen 1990, p. 75, no. 5;

Initially, all the still lifes with earthenware and bottles Van Gogh painted in Brabant were dated to November 1884 (see *cat. 9*). The discovery of other images under today's paint layers has, however, led to the redating of six.<sup>1</sup> Although the underlying pictures vary in theme, they were probably all executed in 1884 or the first half of 1885.<sup>2</sup> The works painted over them must, therefore, be later. Since Van Gogh was preoccupied with still life in the months September and October 1885, this group – plus one with nothing underneath it – can be reassigned to this period.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, the new dating is confirmed by two of the canvases known with certainty to have been painted at just this time: *Beer tankards* (*cat. 37*) and the *Still life with brass cauldron and jug*. The latter is mentioned in a letter from the end of September: 'I have a few still lifes for you – a basket of pota-



35<sup>a</sup> *Still life with jars and pumpkins*  
(F 59 JH 921), 1885. Private  
collection.



35 Still life with brass cauldron and jug

Van Heugten 1995, pp. 68-69;  
Hulsker 1996, pp. 198, 204-05.

## EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 19  
[Dfl. 950]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 8  
[Dfl. 950]; 1905 Leiden, no. 8;  
1906 Rotterdam, no. 7 [Dfl. 950];  
1906 Middelburg, no catalogue  
[Dfl. 950]; 1908 Berlin I, no. 1  
[Dfl. 2,200]; 1908 Dresden, ex  
catalogue [Dfl. 2,200]; 1908  
Frankfurt, no. 3; 1908 The Hague  
& Amsterdam, resp. no cat.  
known, no. 3; 1908 Berlin II,  
no. cat. known [Dfl. 2,600]; 1910  
Berlin, no. 2 [DM 2,000]; 1911  
Frankfurt, no. cat. known; 1911  
Amsterdam, no. 4 [Dfl. 6,000];  
1911-12 Hamburg, no. cat. known  
[DM 3,000]; 1912 Dresden &  
Breslau, no. 8; 1924 Amsterdam,  
no. 3; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 4;  
1928 Berlin, no. 2; 1928 Frank-  
furt am Main, no. 1; 1928  
Vienna, no. 1; 1929 Utrecht,  
no. 1 [not for sale]; 1931  
Amsterdam, no. 17; 1932  
Manchester, no. 4; 1945  
Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1946  
Maastricht & Heerlen, no. 17;  
1947 Groningen, no. 11; 1948-49  
The Hague, no. 25; 1952  
Enschede, no. 3; 1952  
Eindhoven, no. 2; 1953 Zundert,  
no. 1; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 21;  
1953 IJmuiden, no. 1; 1953  
Assen, no. 1; 1954-55 Bern, no. 3;  
1955 Antwerp I, no. 57; 1955  
Amsterdam, no. 28; 1957  
Marseilles, no. 11; 1959-60  
Utrecht, no. 7; 1961-62 Balti-  
more, Cleveland, Buffalo &  
Boston, no. 9; 1962-63 Pitts-  
burgh, Detroit & Kansas City,  
no. 9; 1964 Washington & New  
York, no. 6; 1967 Wolfsburg,  
no. 14; 1968-69 London, no. 28;  
1988 Rome, no. 16; 1990-91  
Essen & Amsterdam, resp.  
no. 5, 4.

toes, fruit, a brass cauldron, etc. – which I painted especially in connection with modelling in various colours' [535/424]. Within this series of (in total) seven still lifes painted in the autumn of 1885, smaller groups – similar in iconography and style – can be discerned: one of these is made up of number 35 and the *Still life with jars and pumpkins* (fig. 35a).<sup>4</sup>

*Still life with brass cauldron and jug* is painted over a depiction of a man dressed in a cloak with a collar and large buttons; he wears a hat and holds a staff in his hands (fig. 35b).<sup>5</sup> The figure is a half-length, unusual in Van Gogh's Dutch œuvre. The large format, too, is exceptional for the period 1884-early 1885, as is the width of the brushes used, which vary from three to five centimetres.<sup>6</sup> We do not know when exactly the man was painted, nor whether the picture was intended to be a portrait or merely a representation of a 'peasant type.' Judging by his clothing and the staff, he was probably one of the shepherds Van Gogh painted between August and October 1884.<sup>7</sup>



35b X-ray of cat. 35.

The edges of the still life reveal something of the coloration of this original image. The background varied from dark brown (to the left of the figure) to brownish green (above and to the right). A stripe of white runs over the brown green at the right. Van Gogh gave the canvas a quarter turn before painting the still life, making this its top edge. It is not clear what the artist intended with this colour, which is rare in his palette.

Like the paintings of baskets with potatoes and fruit (cats. 30-34), *Still life with brass cauldron and jug* should be seen as an exercise in tonal painting. With the exception of the jug, it was laid in entirely in a variety of earth tones. The potatoes in the foreground are basically brown, worked up with beige and grey-brown touches. They are painted on a brown surface, which itself tends slightly towards yellow. This yellow forms a harmonious transition to the brass cauldron, which initially appears almost gold but is actually painted mainly in green and brown. It was laid in using green, which was then covered with a darker shade of the same colour, still visible at the edges of the dents. The last step was the execution of the lit area using ochre yellow, light yellow and brown. The cauldron's interior surface matches that of the green-grey jug, thus relating the objects to one another. The background is very dark. The only certifiable pigment is Prussian blue; it can be found at the top of the still life, where it covers the white edge of the image underneath.

Brass cauldrons are regularly found in the still lifes of the French realists; they were formerly used for cooking over an open fire (fig. 35c). In the French examples, the cauldrons are usually smooth and shiny; Van Gogh's, however, is worn and dented.<sup>8</sup> As with his living models, the artist probably chose the objects for his still lifes based on their everyday character and 'the life [they had] lived' [231/R8]. The jug probably contained rapeseed oil, used for frying. The objects are arranged on a cloth, which bunches up slightly near the potatoes. The transition between the drapery and the background is clearly marked to the right. On the other side, as so often in his still lifes, Van Gogh has left the border between the two vague. The cauldron seems to rest against a tilted brown surface of some kind, which rises up two-thirds of the painting.

The still life was mostly painted wet-into-wet. Only the bright yellow accents on the edge of the cauldron and the dents in the

<sup>1</sup> In addition to *Still life with brass cauldron and jug*, these are cats. 36-37, F 50 JH 529, F 56 JH 530 and F 57 JH 539.

<sup>2</sup> There is a head of a woman under both cat. 37 and F 50 JH 529, and under F 57 JH 539 we find a shepherd with his flock. It is not known what there is under F 56 JH 530. On the dating of these hidden paintings see Van Heugten 1995, pp. 68-69, 71-72. The only underlying image painted in the second half of 1885, and thus overpainted only shortly thereafter, is the bending woman under cat. 36. On the underlying painting in *Still life with brass cauldron and jug* the text.

<sup>3</sup> The still life without an underlying image is F 59 JH 921. This painting is included on the basis of its similarities in format, style, subject matter and overall impression to *Still life with brass cauldron and jug*. Vanbeselaere 1937 was the first to date both still lifes to September 1885. This (correct) date was long ignored by other authors; the editors of *De la Faille* 1970 did adopt it, but were apparently not convinced, adding a question mark.

<sup>4</sup> On the second sub-group from the period September-October 1885 see cats. 36-37. One still life, F 57 JH 539, is stylistically very different and is therefore dated to October-November.

<sup>5</sup> Van Heugten 1995, pp. 68-69.

<sup>6</sup> The only subjects Van Gogh painted in such large format in 1884 were weavers, watermills and an ox and cart.

<sup>7</sup> Van Heugten 1995, pp. 68-69 associates the overpainted man with the shepherd mentioned in letter 468/382, from 22 October 1884. In this letter, the artist compares the figure to one of a spinning woman 'in the same format.' However, it is precisely the size of the spinning woman – 100 × 75 cm (measurements which are also used as reference points in other letters) – which makes it clear that the shepherd in question cannot be the same. The other letters mentioning the large woman spinning are 452/370, 453/371 and 502/405. In the latter he compares the size of The potato eaters – 82 × 114 cm – to that of the spinning woman 'from last year.' The letters with mentions of shepherds are 456/374; 457/R47; 460/R48; 468/382; and 469/383.

<sup>8</sup> By the time of Van Gogh's residence in Nuenen people no longer cooked over an open fire but rather on a kind of range.

<sup>9</sup> The narrower stretcher may date from 1930, when the picture was restored by J.C. Traas.

*On the restoration see Traas's bill (inv. b 4207 V/1962). This bill was dated by V.W. van Gogh to 11 March 1931 and notes 'brass pot with jug. Cleaned, relined, retouched and varnished.... Dfl. 42,50. According to the bill, the work was carried out in 1930.*

<sup>10</sup> See letter 538/427: 'I sent today – post-paid – crate V<sub>4</sub> with the still lifes.' See also cat. 41.

side seem to have been added after the paint had more or less dried. The paint used also here appears to have been slightly dried out; judging by the uneven edges, the brush, too, was old. In contrast to the still life, the underlying figure was painted with robust brushes in an impasto technique; its brushstrokes have remained visible in the final work.

The canvas has retained its original tacking edges. Today's stretcher must be somewhat narrower than the original since the paint layer at the top goes slightly over the edge.<sup>9</sup> This is not true of the other sides, where the paint ends precisely at the edges of the frame. There are traces of dark paint on all sides of the old tacking edges.



35c François Bonvin, *Still life with eggs*, 1855. Photograph courtesy of London, Hazlitt, Gooden & Fox.

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Van Gogh planned to send this painting to Theo along with several others, writing 'I'd like Portier to see them. I'll send them to you as soon as I have the money, since it's now the end of the month'

[535/424]. Theo sent him his allowance by return post, but Van Gogh did not ship the canvases until about two weeks later, after his visit to Amsterdam.<sup>10</sup>

## 36, 37 Still lifes with earthenware

<sup>1</sup> Of these three paintings, the one in the Österreichische Galerie in Vienna (F 56 JH 530) is the most finished.

<sup>2</sup> The precise relationship of F 50 JH 529, in the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, to these three still lifes is unclear. There are similarities to F 56 JH 530 in terms of the objects depicted and their positions relative to one another, but the roughness and lack of perspective in the bottles in F 50 JH 529 has nothing in common with the other three paintings. Nor is the surface on which the bottles rest built up with slanting, parallel brushstrokes; and the highlights on the red objects are indicated with both yellow and pink paint.

On the dating of the last still life painted in the autumn of 1885 (F 57 JH 539) see cat. 43.

<sup>3</sup> The works outside the Van Gogh Museum's collection – in the Kröller-Müller Museum and the Centraal Museum in Utrecht – have been studied using photographs.

<sup>4</sup> The earthenware pot with the flat handles in the centre was very common at the time and was used for preparing porridge or batter. This type came from Bergen op Zoom; the flat bottom indicates that it was to be used on a range. Although Van Gogh tries to make us believe otherwise, by the 1880s most people no longer cooked over an open fire. Pots like these were also used by weavers; they kept glue for repairing broken threads in them (see F 30 JH 479; F 33 JH 489; F 1107 JH 445; F 1114 JH 444; F 1123 JH 455; and F 1134 JH 481).

<sup>5</sup> The underlying image was revealed when the work was x-rayed; see Van Heugten 1995, p. 74.

<sup>6</sup> Van Heugten saw parallels here with the poses of the women shown working at a stove in various works of June 1885.

Within the series of seven still lifes painted in the autumn of 1885 we can distinguish three works by their careful execution: *Still life with earthenware and bottles* (cat. 36), *Beer tankards* (cat. 37) and *Still life with jugs against a window* (fig. 36a).<sup>1</sup> The foreground has been painted similarly in each one, using diagonal brushstrokes that run from the top left to the bottom right.<sup>2</sup> Another common aspect is the use of pink for the highlights, particularly on the objects painted in a reddish brown. When exactly Van Gogh began this practice is unknown; in the still lifes executed between November 1884 and April 1885 the accents are usually set with cream-coloured or yellow paint.<sup>3</sup> In a letter from the second half of October 1885 Vincent mentions the use of pink in his still lifes and alludes, among other things, to the principle of the harmonious combination of two shades of the same colour, such as we find here: 'a light blue against the same dark blue, a pink against brown-red, a lemon yellow against chammy yellow, etc. [...] the effect on each other of two colours of the same sort' [539/428].



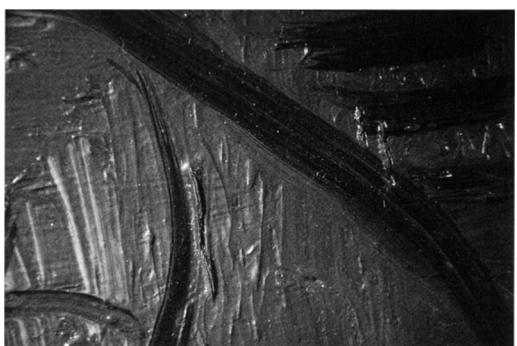
36a *Still life with jugs against a window*  
(F 56 JH 530), 1885. Vienna,  
Österreichische Galerie.

In *Still life with earthenware and bottles* (cat. 36) pink is used not only for the highlights on the earthenware bowl, but can also be found in the Cologne pot, at the edge of the turquoise bowl, in the highlight on the bottle to the left, and on the edge of the lower white bowl in the stack in the left foreground. Here the pink forms part of a complementary contrast: the edge of the bowl above it is painted a pastel green. The same effect can be seen in the red-brown bowl, which stands out against the green of the bottles and the background. By adding highlights to the three bottles Van Gogh subtly liberated them from this backdrop, which is more or less the same shade.

The still life is composed of everyday items.<sup>4</sup> For Van Gogh it was a study in colour, above all in tone, and he has not paid much attention to the actual forms of the various objects, resulting in the rather flattened bowls and the crooked Cologne pot. The work was painted wet-into-wet, with a stiff, syrupy paint that gives the impression of having been already somewhat dried out even before being applied. Only the decoration of the Cologne pot is executed using a thin, very liquid blue (fig. 36b). The stiff character of the paint – probably used on purpose to express the materiality of the objects – leaves the direction of the brushstrokes plainly visible.

Striking then, too, are the areas where these do not follow the image. This is due to the remains of a painting underneath, which Van Gogh apparently did not scrape off entirely before reusing the canvas.<sup>5</sup> The subject of the first painting was a woman working in the fields; she is shown in profile, bending forward (fig. 36c).<sup>6</sup>

During the entire summer of 1885 Van Gogh had made studies of



36b Detail of cat. 36.

<sup>7</sup> For the studies on paper see Drawings 11, nos. 170-74, pp. 203-10, and nos. 180-92, pp. 222-43.

<sup>8</sup> In the light of Van Gogh's remark at the end of June 1885 that he 'probably had [to have] a hundred – or even more before I can begin something new' [514/414], he probably did not make his first painting on the subject before the end of July.

<sup>9</sup> Most of these large figures are drawn on the same kind of wove paper with the watermark TZ & Z; see Drawings 11, p. 222.

<sup>10</sup> Given the fact that the cork of the bottle at the right is cut off by the edge of the canvas, the top of the still life must be missing a piece at least 2 cm wide. The underlying image must also have been somewhat broader, since Van Gogh's figures are never so confined within the picture plane.

<sup>11</sup> See fn. 9.

<sup>12</sup> Analysis of samples revealed that the ground is pink-yellow with grey; see the report of Inez van der Werf, September 1997. Since we have only a few analyses of the grounds of other paintings, and it appears to the naked eye to be cream-coloured, we may assume that what we see here is a standard primer.

<sup>13</sup> It is certain, at least, that no other examples of this kind of canvas are to be found in Van Gogh's Dutch paintings in the Van Gogh Museum.

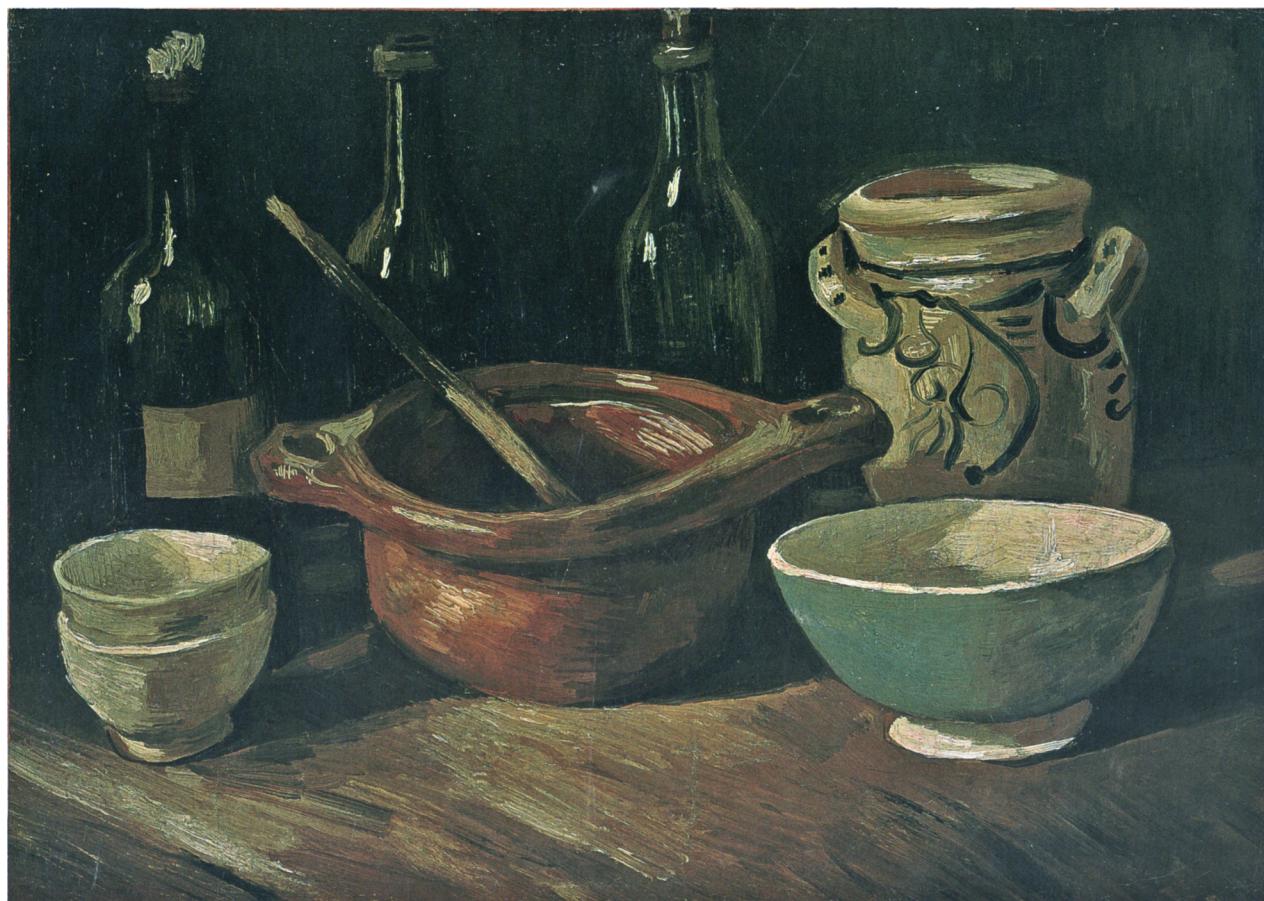
<sup>14</sup> Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962). V.W. van Gogh dated the bill 2 January 1930. The restoration therefore probably took place at the end of 1929.

<sup>15</sup> In an overview of the various problems in the collection, entitled 'Gebreken collectie Vincent van Gogh' and dated 11 February 1970, this work is annotated 'glue lining – reline'; it is not known when exactly the relining took place.

<sup>16</sup> See fn. 14.

<sup>17</sup> The only exception is the exhibition catalogue of the Armory Show, which dates Beer tankards to 1882.

<sup>18</sup> According to Van Heugten 1995, p. 72, this is the same model found in F 160 JH 722, and a letter sketch indicates that both heads should be dated to March-April 1885. However, neither the woman's face nor her cap really resemble those in that particular painting. Although the nature of the x-ray hampers the comparison with other Van Gogh heads, the overpainted woman's face seems to have more in common with the models in F 1184 JH 597, F 138 JH 644 and F 155 JH 787. The cap she wears is similar to the one in F 154 JH 608, F 1177 JH 609 and F 127 JH 651.



36 Still life with earthenware and bottles



37 Beer tankards

<sup>18</sup> The smooth character of the paint layer was probably achieved through the addition of an extra binder or thinner, which made the paint more liquid.

<sup>19</sup> The Nuenen flower still life is F 197 JH 1167 (see fig. 8b).

<sup>20</sup> The tankards were made in Westerwald, an important pottery-making centre in Germany. The pewter lids were attached in the Netherlands. See R.E. Kistemaker and V.T. van Vilsteren, *Bier! Geschiedenis van een volksdrank*, Amsterdam 1994, pp. 58-59.

<sup>21</sup> Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh, 16 December 1932 (inv. b 4204 V/1962): 'Removal of cardboard and relining, cleaning and retouching of a Still life of three beer tankards (cat. no. 2), with addition of a new stretcher... Dfl. 30.-'.

<sup>22</sup> Inv. b 2192 V/1982, catalogue of the 1905 exhibition, annotated with prices.

<sup>23</sup> Heijbroek/Wouthuysen 1993, pp. 191-92.

<sup>24</sup> This exhibition, which was shown in Chicago and Boston as well as New York, was the first overview of European and American avant-garde art in the United States. In addition to Beer tankards another Nuenen painting was included – a still life with apples – probably cat. 33.

peasants working outdoors, initially only on paper but later also in oil on canvas.<sup>7</sup> The size of the figure in relation to the picture plane is reminiscent of a series of drawings executed in July and August on large sheets of paper.<sup>8</sup> Even the original size of the painting was probably close to the standard measurements of these drawings, 58 × 45 centimetres.<sup>9</sup> Although there is no preliminary study for this bending woman, a sheet in the collection of the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo showing a woman leaning to the right, has many similarities to the overpainted figure (fig. 36d).

The edges of the canvas have been cropped, with the result that the still life – at least at the top – is much smaller than it was originally.<sup>10</sup> A diagonal cut in the canvas makes the various layers of paint clearly visible. The grey-green underlayer of the first image was brought on directly over the cream-coloured ground; it contains fairly large pigment particles, in



36c X-ray of cat. 36.

white, blue and red.<sup>11</sup> The dark green background was painted over this layer.

The canvas – very densely woven and with a relatively large number of thin threads per square centimetre – is very unusual.<sup>12</sup> It was once laid on panel, but this was removed in 1929 by J.C. Traas, as appears from his description of his restoration work: ‘still life with pots and bowls, panel removed, relined, retouched and varnished.’<sup>13</sup> The restorer affixed it to a linen support, probably using glue rather than his usual wax resin mixture.<sup>14</sup> This second support was removed in 1970 and replaced by a wax resin lining.<sup>15</sup> Traas probably retouched the brightly coloured blocks of paint still visible on the bottle at the right. Their original colour – pink and orange – however, indicates that they may actually have been transferred paint from a picture from Van Gogh’s Paris period.

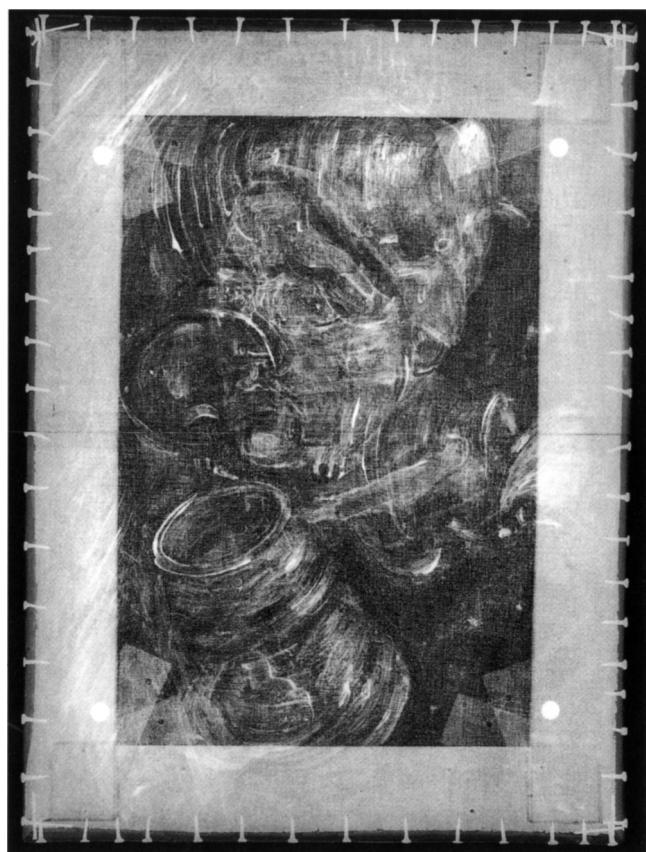
*Still life with earthenware and bottles and Beer tankards* have always been dated to the period November 1884–April 1885.<sup>16</sup> The works have now been redated thanks to the discovery of under-



36d *Peasant woman working in the fields*  
(F 1269 JH 832), 1885. Otterlo,  
Kröller-Müller Museum.

lying images, one of which has already been discussed. In the case of *Beer tankards*, the vanished picture is the head of a woman (fig. 36e), probably painted between December 1884 and May 1885, during Van Gogh's great 'head campaign' (see *cats. 10-18*).<sup>17</sup> Given the type of canvas used, it is possible to advance a somewhat narrower dating, namely March-April 1885. The only other works in the Van Gogh Museum painted on this kind of canvas were executed at just this time (*cats. 21-22*).

We may deduce from the fact that the brushstrokes of the head are still clearly visible under raking light that Van Gogh did not scrape off the first painting before beginning the still life of beer tankards. The woman's eyes, for example, can be seen as raised areas in the still life. So as not to be disturbed by the colours of his earlier work, Van Gogh may have coated it with a layer of dark paint. This was probably the same olive green used for the base



36e X-ray of cat. 37.

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colour of the still life. He worked the composition up from this colour, giving the objects form with strokes of light and dark paint.

In addition to practising modelling with various shades of the same colour, Van Gogh also used this work as a study in chiaroscuro. The highlights and the shadows suggest that the composition was lit by two lamps: one at the left front, the other – somewhat higher – towards the back at the left. The only area in the work which does not coincide with these positions is the dark spot behind and to the left of the left-hand tankard, where, given the arrangement of the lights, one would expect a bright patch.

*Beer tankards* was laid in using mainly earth tones, applied smoothly.<sup>18</sup> As a contrast to this brownish grey colour, Van Gogh used Prussian blue to indicate the bands around the tankards and the shadows. He accentuated the shadowy contour on the underside of the fallen tankard with the same colour. This contrast is now mitigated by the yellowed varnish, which is itself coated with surface dirt. The artist made a subtle distinction between the highlights on the various materials: on the grey tin he placed white accents, on the grey-brown tankards pink. He employed rather narrow brushes, and probably also regularly used the side of the brush to make thin lines, as the rough character of the light-coloured hatching under the right-hand tankard indicates.

The beer tankards (also found in a Nuenen flower still life; see fig. 8b) were typical for the Brabant inns of Van Gogh's time.<sup>19</sup> Every customer had his own tankard, which he left behind after use. The lid, which prevented the beer from going flat, was usually engraved with the owner's name. The tankards came in two sizes, a half and a full litre, stamped in a blue square on the body. Van Gogh's tankards also have the square, but he has painted the measure illegibly.<sup>20</sup>

As with many works in the Van Gogh Museum's collection, this canvas, too, was originally laid on cardboard. This support was removed by J.C. Traas, and the painting relined.<sup>21</sup> The lack of typical craquelure patterns and the presence of long, diagonal cracks in the paint layer can be attributed to the marouflage.

Johanna van Gogh-Bonger offered only a few still lifes from Van Gogh's Nuenen period for sale. This makes her efforts to sell this particular picture all the more remarkable. Like many of the paintings in the family's collection, the still life was first put on the market at the large retrospective Van Gogh-Bonger organised at the

Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1905. It remained unsold – probably due to the considerable asking price (Dfl. 600).<sup>22</sup> From about 1911 it was in the hands of the dealer J.H. de Bois, who had worked for C.M. van Gogh and later for Artz & De Bois.<sup>23</sup> He sent the work, along with nine others from Johanna's collection, to the Armory Show in New York in February 1913 – one of the most important exhibitions of avant-garde art of the time.<sup>24</sup> Although by this period Van Gogh had made something of a name in Europe, this was the American public's first opportunity to see his paintings first hand. Here, too, however, *Beer tankards* remained unsold. In September of the same year De Bois made one final effort, sending it to an exhibition in Bromberg. Once again the picture found no buyer; in November he gave up and returned it to Johanna.

### 36 Still life with earthenware and bottles

SEPTEMBER-MID-OCTOBER 1885

Oil on canvas

40.0 × 65.0 cm (original support: 38.8 × 55.8 cm)

Unsigned

Inv. s 138 V/1962

F 53 JH 538

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 22 × 22 (fine) threads, densely woven, cropped edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on panel. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Another image under the paint layer. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide. Varnished.

#### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 26, vol. 2, pl. xv; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 285-86, 330, 346-47, 349, 414; Derkert 1946, pp. 106-07; De la Faille 1939, p. 74, no. 65; Tralbaut 1955, pp. 5, 7, 10, 35; De la Faille 1970, pp. 62, 613; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 130-31, 318, no. 170; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 230-32, no. 94; Van Heugten 1995, p. 74; Hulsken 1996, pp. 125, 132; Tokyo 1996, p. 138, no. 2.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 24 [Dfl. 650]; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 3; 1932 Manchester, no. 7;

1937 Paris, no. 51; 1945 Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1946 Maastricht & Heerlen, no. 16; 1946 Stockholm, Gothenburg & Malmö, no. 10; 1946 Copenhagen, no. 10; 1947 Groningen, no. 5; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 10; 1950 Hilversum, no. 7; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 1; 1951 St. Rémy, no. 1; 1952 Enschede, no. 2; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 1; 1953 Zundert, no. 2; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 7; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 2; 1953 Assen, no. 2; 1954-55 Willemstad, no. 4; 1955 Palm Beach, Miami & New Orleans, no. 4; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 55; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 26; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 1; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 7; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 7; 1963 Humlebaek, no. 6; 1965 Charleroi & Ghent, no. 4; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 2, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 11; 1968-69 London, no. 27; 1976-77 Tokyo, Kyoto & Nagoya, no. 13; 1984 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 94; 1996 Tokyo, no. 2; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 3.

### 37 Beer tankards

SEPTEMBER-MID-OCTOBER 1885

Oil on canvas

42.5 × 31.5 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 96 V/1962

F 49 JH 534

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 17 × 17 (fine) threads, densely woven, original edges, wax resin lining, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, thickness unknown.

Another image under the paint layer. Brush size: varying from very narrow to medium.

Varnished. Details: weave imprints.

#### PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1927-30 on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

#### LITERATURE

Bremmer 1926, pp. 83-84, no. 83; De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 25, vol. 2, pl. xiv; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 285, 330, 346-48, 414; De la Faille 1939, p. 69, no. 57; Tralbaut 1955, pp. 5, 10-11, 35; De la Faille 1970, pp. 60-61, 613; Amsterdam 1987, p. 317, no. 1.64; Heijbroek/Wouthuysen 1993, p. 192; Van Heugten 1995, p. 72; Hulsken 1996, pp. 124-25, 132.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 446 [Dfl. 600]; 1913 New York, no. 436 [\$2,600]; 1913 Chicago, no. 420 [\$2,600]; 1913 Boston, no. 225 [\$2,600]; 1913 Bromberg, no cat. known; 1926 Amsterdam, no. 6; 1931 Amsterdam, no. 2; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 9; 1954-55 Bern, no. 4; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 54; 1984 Nuenen, unnumbered.

## 38, 39 Birds' nests

Shortly after completing his still lifes of potatoes and fruit (*cats. 30-34*) Van Gogh began on a series of birds' nests, as indicated in a letter from the beginning of October. By that time he already had 'four done,' and one more almost ready to go.<sup>1</sup> There are five known paintings of this motif.<sup>2</sup>

The smaller of the two canvases in the Van Gogh Museum (*cat. 38*) depicts two nests, both from golden orioles.<sup>3</sup> This bird weaves its nest between the branches of high trees. The other painting (*cat. 39*) shows five nests, two of which are identical. The rounded forms to the right and in the centre are wrens' nests; the wren reinforces its dwelling with little pieces of straw, clearly shown here. The mossy nest with the blue eggs in the foreground probably came from a hedge sparrow, while the one to the left cannot be identified. There appears to be another nest in front of the wren's nest to the right, but it is depicted only vaguely.

These nests were all specimens from Van Gogh's own collection,<sup>4</sup> which included 'at least 30 different birds' nests' and was kept – according to his friend Anton Kerssemakers – in two cupboards in the studio.<sup>5</sup> According to Vincent's sister Elisabeth, however, the arrangement was somewhat different. Although it is true that she is not always a reliable source, the two descriptions are not necessarily mutually exclusive:<sup>6</sup> 'In the corner of the studio there was a dead tree – it was blown down during a storm and had died. Shortened and placed in a tub with some earth around it, it was decorated with a whole collection of birds' nests, gathered by the artist on his nature walks.'<sup>7</sup> She not only mentions 'the simple dwellings of a sparrow, starling or thrush' but also a 'compact wren's nest,' and 'the snow-white, wolly nest of the golden oriole, woven from march grass and covered with white down, very odd to look at,' all placed among the 'forks of the dead crown.'<sup>8</sup>

Contrary to Elisabeth's claim, Van Gogh did not collect all the nests himself. He occasionally had help from the local

<sup>1</sup> He wrote that he was 'nu bezig' ('now busy') with still lifes of birds' nests [536/425]. Since he notes in the same sentence that he had already finished four, this can only mean that he had begun work on a fifth.

<sup>2</sup> The three other paintings are F 108 JH 940, F 112 JH 938 and F 110 JH 941.

<sup>3</sup> The following descriptions and identifications were supplied by the ornithologist Fred Hustings, SOVON Vogelonderzoek Nederland, Beek-Ubbergen.

<sup>4</sup> Letter 536/425 mentions 'still lifes my birds' nests.'

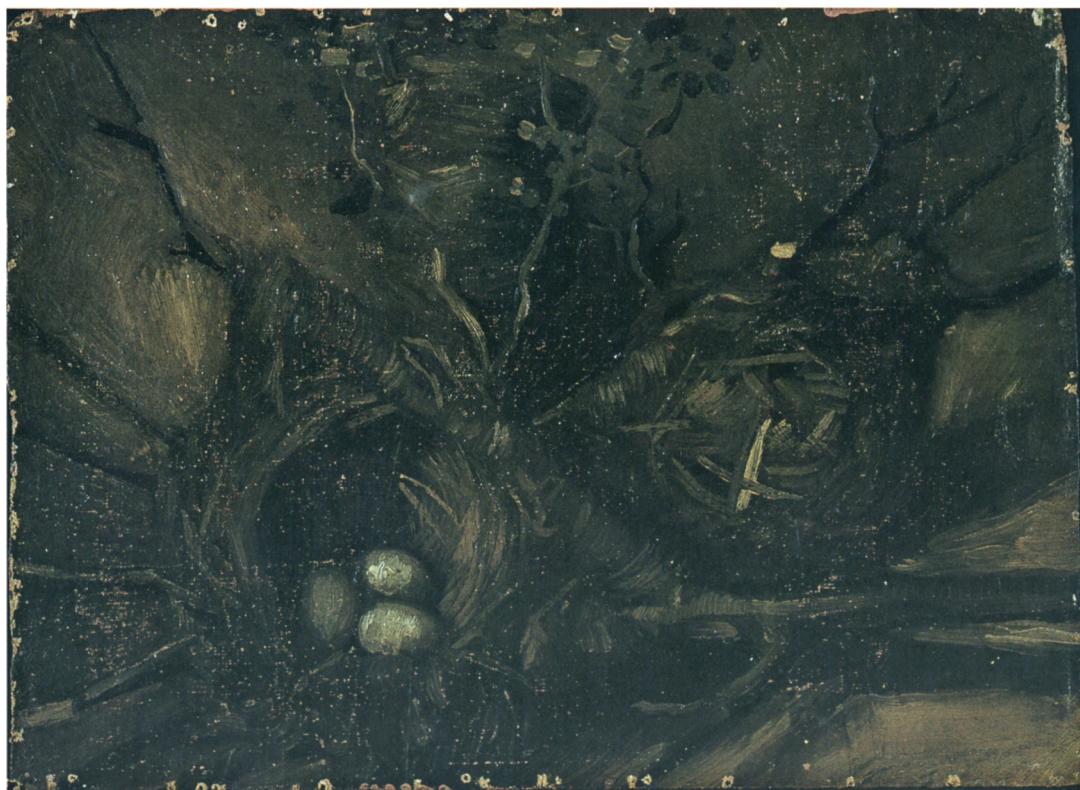
<sup>5</sup> The quotation is cited from Kerssemakers 1912, p. 6. On the cupboards, which also contained 'moss, clogs, etc.,' see Anton Kerssemakers's letter to Johan Briedé, 23 June 1914 (inv. b 1423 V/1962). The cupboards were probably built just after Van Gogh went to live at Schafrath's in May 1885. In letter 493/398 he notes that there was 'no place to put anything' in the studio and that he would have to make something.

<sup>6</sup> Du Quesne-van Gogh 1910, pp. 66-67. If the cupboards mentioned by Kerssemakers only entered the studio in May 1885 (see fn. 5), then Elisabeth may be describing how the room looked before.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 67.

<sup>9</sup> There is much evidence for this: see Stokvis 1926, p. 30 and the 1953 edition of Van Gogh's letters, no. 435a; M.E. Tralbaut, 'In Van Gogh's voetspoor te Nuenen en omgeving,' *De toerist* 11 (1 June 1955), p. 382, notes that Van Gogh wanted not only the nests, but also the branches on which they were found. See also letter 510/411, in which the artist mentions that he now has a



38 Still life with birds' nests

wren's nest, and De Brouwer 1984, p. 112, which tells the story of Leonardus Kuijten, who found a golden oriole's nest, which 'you [have] to cut down with a long stick.' Joseph van der Harten, one of Van Gogh's Eindhoven pupils, also collected birds' nests and traded them with the painter; see the letter from Albert Plasschaert, 16 May 1912 (inv. b 3032 V/1962 and letter 518/-).

10 Van Gogh sent Van Rappard 'thrush, blackbird, golden oriole, wren [and] finch' nests.

11 Quoted from the edition of 1861, pp. 207-15 ('Le nid. Architecture des oiseaux'). In 1877, Van Gogh – who was 'crazy about' the book – gave a copy to an acquaintance, P.C. Görilitz (1851-1921); see M.J. Brusse, 'Vincent van Gogh als boekverkopersbediende,' Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant (26 May and 2 June 1914). Van Gogh also notes the chapter titles in letter 142/121.

12 Michelet 1861, op. cit. (note 11), p. 209: 'Donc, la maison, c'est la personne même, sa forme et son effort le plus immédiat; je dirai sa souffrance. [...] Le nid est un création de l'amour. Aussi, l'œuvre est empreinte d'une force de volonté extraordinaire, d'une passion singulièrement persévérente.'

13 See Van Tilborgh in Amsterdam 1987, p. 132. The shipment of nests to Van Rappard should probably also be seen in this context (letter 533/R58). The gift seems to have been a reference to Van Rappard's earlier criticism of Van Gogh's technical deficiencies (letter 515/R53). His friend had shown little sympathy for Van Gogh's efforts to create a more personal form of expression, and Van Gogh probably wanted to remind him of this with the present of nests, a 'creation of love.'

14 There was a tradition, particularly in England, of painting birds' nests in their natural setting, but these are clearly not still lifes in the usual sense.

15 Graetz 1963, p. 39; adopted by Werness 1972, p. 183. J. Leymarie, 'Symbole et réalité chez Van Gogh,' Mededelingen van de Dienst voor Schone Kunsten der Gemeente 's- Gravenhage 9 (1954), nos. 1-2, p. 45, went still further, referring to them as a 'symbole du foyer, et sans doute aussi, comme chez Bosch, de la sexualité.'

16 In letter 536/425 he also announced his intention to make 'some drawings of the same motif' in the winter, but never produced anything more than the sketch in the letter.

17 See Werness 1972, p. 183. The first illustrated edition was published in 1867, the second in 1881.

youth, giving them an average of 10 (Dutch) cents per nest.<sup>9</sup> Particularly unusual and interesting specimens – such as those of the wren or oriole – were more lucrative. The former is relatively rare, while the second requires both courage and the skill to loosen the nest, woven between the high branches.<sup>10</sup> Van Gogh counted these nests among the most beautiful in his collection, as appears – albeit indirectly – from a letter to his friend Van Rappard, to whom he had sent a few: 'I thought you might like these birds' nest, like I do, because birds – like the wren or the golden oriole – can truly be said to be artists in their own right' [533/R58].

Van Gogh had probably derived this idea from reading the chapter on nests in Jules Michelet's popular *L'oiseau*, published in 1856.<sup>11</sup> According to the author, despite their difficulties in handling the materials, birds nonetheless know how to make works of art out of their homes. Physically fragile, they are hardly suited to the strenuous work of building, but driven by nothing but love they manage to do wonderful things.<sup>12</sup>

Van Gogh may well have recognised something of himself in Michelet's description of the artist pursuing his calling sustained only by will and passion, but whether this was what moved him to paint these still lifes seems improbable.<sup>13</sup> From the point of view of iconography they are almost entirely without precedent. Birds' nests were sometimes included in 17th- and 18th-century Dutch flower still lifes – for example in the work of Jan van Huysum (1682-1749) – but there are almost none in which they are the sole feature.<sup>14</sup> Although some scholars have associated Van Gogh's choice of subject matter with his own longing for 'a nest – a house,'<sup>15</sup> it seems more likely that he was merely seeking some respite from the rather monotonous series of still lifes he had recently been working on, dominated by potatoes (*cats. 30-34*). The nests were readily available in the studio, and in his enthusiasm for his new motif he even went so far as to speculate that 'the [still lifes], with the colours of the moss, dry leaves & grasses, clay, etc., might be pleasing to those who know a good deal about nature' [536/425].<sup>16</sup> These still lifes, like those that had gone before, were also exercises in tone. The artist thus claimed proudly that he had 'literally painted the white and grey moss with a mud colour [...] it brings some light to the study' [539/428].

He was probably referring to number 39, the nest at the left being the mossiest.

The birds' nests are consistently shown against a perfectly neutral background. Here, Van Gogh probably followed the example of Hector Giacomelli (1822–1904), who had arranged the loose nests in an almost identical, seemingly arbitrary manner for a wood engraving in Michelet's *L'oiseau* (fig. 38a).<sup>17</sup> As in his still lifes with potatoes, Van Gogh painted the background in a dark tone, in order to stress (rather unnecessarily) that 'the objects are seen not in their natural surroundings but against a conventional *fond*. [...] Given that the point is to paint nests from one's own collection, one can't emphasise enough that this background and nature are two entirely different things – I made the background black, period' [539/428].

We find a similarly black (in any case dark brown) background in the still life with two nests (*cat. 38*). The composition here is simple but nonetheless lively, with one nest shown from the side and another, as it were, from above.<sup>18</sup> The painting is a study in brown; the only other colours are shades of green. With the aid of a microscope one can make out a thin layer of brown under the highest left branch, probably the base coat, over which the image has been painted wet-into-wet. The canvas was tacked to a support before being worked on, as the holes around the edges indicate.

<sup>18</sup> We find a similar arrangement of two identical objects in the later still lifes of shoes, sunflowers and crabs (F 333 JH 1236, F 375 JH 1329 and F 606 JH 1662).

<sup>19</sup> See Van Heugten 1995, pp. 67–68.

<sup>20</sup> In *ibid.*, p. 68, Van Heugten claims that Van Gogh used the underlying layer for the colour of the highest branch on the left, but closer examination with the microscope revealed no supporting evidence for this hypothesis.

<sup>21</sup> Letter 539/428: 'the nests are also painted against a black background.'

<sup>22</sup> As far as we know, the other still lifes with birds' nests (see fn. 3) were not originally in Johanna van Gogh-Bonger's collection, with the likely exception of F 112 JH 938; see the introductory essay 'Five parcels and three crates,' fn. 44.

<sup>23</sup> The other work was F 112 JH 938, which depicts three nests. The one on the left is a wren's nest, the one on the right a golden oriole's. The one in the middle cannot be identified.

<sup>24</sup> See J.C. Traas's bill from 1929 (inv. b 4208 V/1962), which describes the restoration as follows: 'cardboard removed, both sides cleaned, retouched, varnished and framed in oak.' Three years later the same restorer treated the still life with five nests (*cat. 39*): 'Relined, cleaned and varnished, with a new stretcher' (inv. b 4205 V/1962, 31 December 1932).



38a Hector Giacomelli, from: Jules Michelet, *L'oiseau*, Paris 1881. Utrecht, Universiteitsbibliotheek.

<sup>25</sup> First noted in *De la Faille* 1928. *De la Faille* 1970, p. 615, erroneously suggests that both the front and back of cat. 38 were shown in Amsterdam in 1905.

<sup>26</sup> This designation was first used in Andries Bonger's 'Catalogues des œuvres de Vincent van Gogh,' circa 1890 (inv. b 3055 V/1962).

<sup>27</sup> Further confirmation that it was, in fact, the still life with five nests that was shown in 1905 is found in the list of works for the exhibition held at the Montross Gallery in New York in 1920, which notes the catalogue number of the 1905 exhibition (no. 18) alongside this painting; see 'Lijst New York-schilderijen Montross-gallery, "No 18 Vogelnesten 46 x 39 Nunen" and 'Paintings Montross Gallery New York' (inv. b 6240 V/1996 and b 6245 V/1996).

The x-ray reveals that this still life was painted over another picture – an interior with a loom (fig. 38b).<sup>19</sup> The scene probably dates from the first half of 1884 and was later cut in two. At the upper right we see the white of a windowframe and the green of a windowpane. Some of this grey-green colour of the interior shows through in the lower left corner, while at the upper left we find traces of red.<sup>20</sup> The image of the weaver's cottage, too, was tacked up at one time: some of the paint at the upper left in the still life has been applied over a pinhole.

Interestingly, in contrast to the other four works, the background of the still life with five nests (cat. 39) is light rather than dark. It also seems to have been painted in later: the rather dryish yellow paint in the fore- and background follows the contours of the nests and has even been applied



38b X-ray of cat. 38.



39 Still life with birds' nests

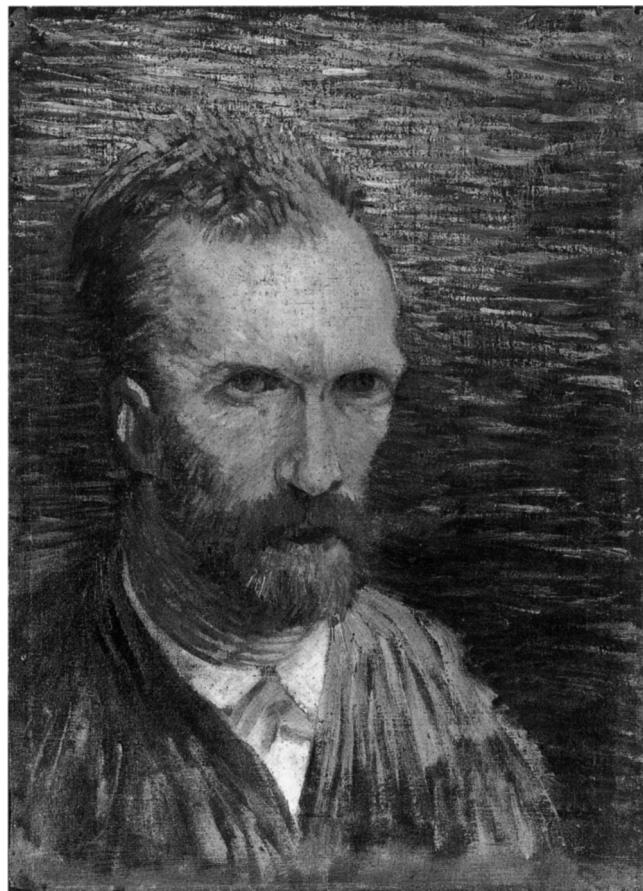
28 'Catalogues des œuvres de Vincent van Gogh,' cit. (note 26), no. 16: 'nid d'hirondelles' (swallows' nests).

29 See the list for the Vollard exhibition (inv. b 1437 V/1962), no. 33: 'zwaluwnesten' (swallows' nests).

30 On this loan see Heijbroek 1991, p. 202.

over the signature at the lower left. In turn, the unusual vivid red accents and the grey-green touches were themselves painted over the yellow, although during the same session.

When exactly Van Gogh reworked the canvas is unknown. Since the artist explicitly stated that all the still lifes with birds' nests sent to Theo had black backgrounds, it may reasonably be conjectured that the changes were carried out during his sojourn in Paris, when he had begun to find the Nuenen pictures rather too dark.<sup>21</sup> The abnormal structure of the paint layer between the two wrens' nests may indicate that Van Gogh had initially placed the nest now at the far right here, although



38c Self-portrait (F 109v JH 1303),  
1887. Verso of cat. 38.

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the x-ray reveals nothing to support this. It is also striking that, in contrast to the thinly painted background, the nests themselves are very pastose. There are almost no visible brush-strokes, and the paint seems more sculpted than applied; and indeed, Van Gogh probably did model it after it had partially dried.

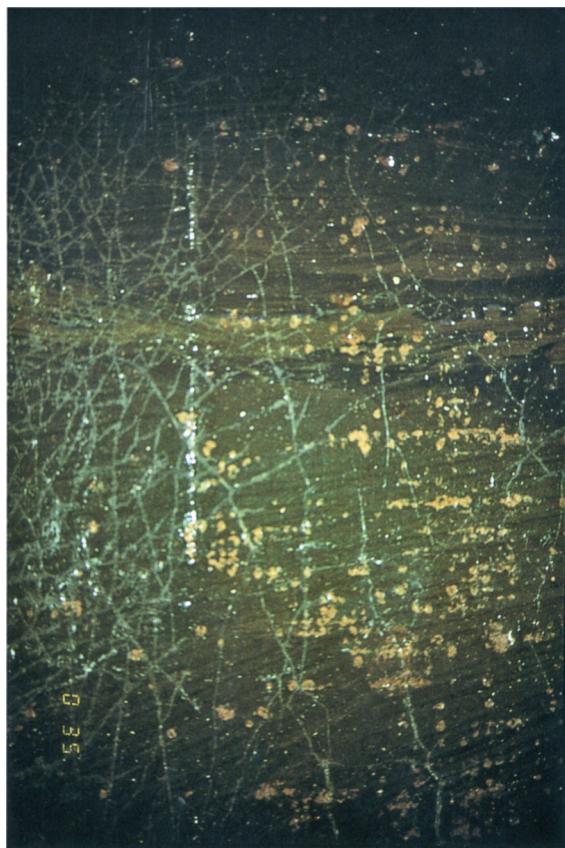
Although the artist explained these new still lifes to his brother in detail, we cannot be sure how much he really valued them. They are all rather small, practically the same size as the less ambitious still lifes with fruit (*cats. 32, 38 and 43*). Moreover, he only sent two of the five to Theo – the ones now in the Van Gogh Museum.<sup>22</sup> Number 39 and one other are signed; it seems Van Gogh thought these were the best of the series.<sup>23</sup>

Like several other works of the Nuenen period, Van Gogh primed the verso of number 38 in grey-pink when he was in Paris, using it for a self-portrait (fig. 38c). Some of the paint has gone over the edges. There are fragments of paint in this colour on the surface of the still life (fig. 38d), indicating that it once rested against another picture with the same ground. The self-portrait disappeared when the still life was laid on cardboard. We do not know when exactly this occurred. The cardboard was removed by J.C. Traas in 1929, revealing the self-portrait once again.<sup>24</sup>

It has usually been assumed that Johanna van Gogh-Bonger chose the darker still life (*cat. 38*) to be shown at the retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1905.<sup>25</sup> This was not, however, the case. The picture shown is listed in the catalogue as ‘Swallows’ nests,’<sup>26</sup> referring not to this work but to the other still life with wrens’ nests, number 39. Swallows, particularly house martins, make their homes in buildings and can thus easily be confused with the loose, low-lying wren’s nest, but not with that of the golden oriole, which is always woven between branches.<sup>27</sup>

This correction to the exhibition history of the two works indicates that the still life with five nests (*cat. 39*) must have enjoyed a certain status within the Van Gogh family. It was given a separate notation in the inventory of works in Theo’s collection, compiled by Andries Bonger (1861–1936).<sup>28</sup> Johanna sent it to an exhibition organised by the Parisian art dealer

Ambroise Vollard (1861-1936) in 1896,<sup>29</sup> and it was also among the pictures lent to the Rijksmuseum in 1917-18, along with such ambitious works as *The potato eaters*, *The cottage* and *The old church tower* (cats. 26-28).<sup>30</sup> The other still life (cat. 38) received no attention. It was not displayed until the Van Gogh Museum opened in 1973.



38d Detail of cat. 38.

**38 Still life with birds' nests**

LATE SEPTEMBER-EARLY OCTOBER

1885

Oil on canvas

31.4 x 43.0 cm

Unsigned

Inv. s 71 V/1962

F 109r JH 942

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 18 x 14 (medium) threads, medium weave, original edges, formerly canvas on cardboard. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Another image under the paint layer. Brush size: varying from narrow to extra wide. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, paint fragments, grey-pink paint at the edges, pinhole, nail holes.

Painting on the verso (fig. 38c).

PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 40, vol. 2, pl. xxix; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 302-03, 398, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 112, no. 125; De la Faille 1970, pp. 80, 615; Amsterdam 1987, p. 322, no. 1.92; Van Heugten 1995, pp. 67-68; Hulsker 1996, pp. 204, 206-07.

EXHIBITION

1998-99 Amsterdam,  
no catalogue.

**39 Still life with birds' nests**

LATE SEPTEMBER-EARLY OCTOBER

1885 AND 1886-87

Oil on canvas

39.3 x 46.5 cm

Signed at the lower left in brown-red: Vincent

Inv. s 1 V/1962

F 111 JH 939

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 x 18 (medium) threads, medium weave, original (tacking?) edges, wax resin lining. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: narrow and medium. Varnished.

PROVENANCE

1885-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1916-19 on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1927-30 on loan to the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LETTER

539/428.

LITERATURE

Bremmer 1917, pp. 16-17, no. 11; De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 40, vol. 2, pl. xxix; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 302-04, 398, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 113, no. 127; De la Faille 1970, pp. 81, 616; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 132-33, 322, no. 1.93; Glasgow 1990-91, pp. 131-32, no. 22; Hulsker 1996, pp. 204, 206-07; Tokyo 1996, pp. 138-39, no. 3.

EXHIBITIONS

1896 Paris, no cat. known  
[FF 150]; 1905 Amsterdam, no. 18  
[Dfl. 700]; 1906 Rotterdam, no. 6; 1906 Middelburg, no catalogue [not for sale]; 1920 New York, no. 67 [\$6,000]; 1924 Amsterdam, no. 10; 1926 Munich, no. 2088 (not for sale); 1931 Amsterdam, no. 10; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 30; 1949 Middelburg, no. 5; 1953 Zundert, no. 7; 1953 Hoensbroek, no. 22; 1953 IJmuiden, no. 6; 1953 Assen, no. 6; 1954 Zürich, no. 4; 1954-55 Bern, no. 10; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 59; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 30; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 7; 1957 Nuenen, no catalogue; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 10; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 10; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1968-69 London, no. 51; 1990-91 Glasgow, no. 22; 1991 Amsterdam, no. 38; 1996 Tokyo, no. 3; 1998-99 Amsterdam, no catalogue.

## 40 The vicarage at Nuenen

SEPTEMBER-EARLY  
OCTOBER 1885

Oil on canvas  
33.0 × 43.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 140 V/1962  
F 182 JH 948

TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 × 14 (thick) threads, densely woven, original tacking edges, wax resin lining. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from very narrow to medium; paint applied directly from the tube (?). Varnished.

PROVENANCE

1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 56, vol. 2, pl. XLIX; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 303, 393, 416; De la Faille 1939, p. 163, no. 199; De la Faille 1970, pp. 100, 618; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 136-37, 322, no. 1.95; Den Bosch 1987-88, pp. 226-27, no. 90; Rome 1988, no. 14; Hulsker 1996, pp. 208-09.

This painting depicts the vicarage of the Reformed congregation at Nuenen, located at Berg 26. It was the home of Van Gogh's parents from August 1882, when the reverend was appointed to his post (fig. 40a). Vincent had moved in with them in early December 1883, but following his father's unexpected death on 26 March 1885, his sister Anna had asked him to leave.<sup>1</sup> At the end of April or the beginning of May he went to live at the house of Johannes Schafrat, the Catholic curate, from whom he had been renting a studio since May 1884.<sup>2</sup>

The vicarage was built in 1764, although renovations in 1827 and 1844 had changed its appearance to some extent.<sup>3</sup> In Van Gogh's time, the original brick façade had been plastered, and only one of the four windows in the roof remained.<sup>4</sup>



40a Photograph of the vicarage at Nuenen. Nuenen, J.C. Jegerings photograph collection.

To the right we see the entrance to the neighbouring family's coach house, built in 1840.

Although not visible in the x-ray, *The vicarage* appears to have been painted over another, partially scraped-off picture. There are several scratches in the area of the sky, and a vertical line running along the right side of the house. The colours are thoroughly confounded, making it difficult to determine exactly how the picture was painted. The paint layer appears rather stiff and it is often hard to define the brushstrokes. The ochre in the bush next to the house and in the tree seems to have been applied directly from the tube. The work may have been begun on the spot and was probably finished in the studio. The leaves and branches to the right, and the leaves of the trees to the left, were certainly added in a second sitting, once the underlying layer had partially dried. In 1929 J.C. Traas relined the painting and placed it on a new, probably smaller stretcher.<sup>5</sup> We find parts of the image folded a half to one centimetre over the edge.

Like the *Congregation leaving the Reformed church at Nuenen* (cat. 6), this view of his father's vicarage stands in sharp contrast to

#### EXHIBITIONS

1931 Amsterdam, no. 1; 1937 Paris, no. 101; 1945 Amsterdam, unnumbered; 1946 Maastricht & Heerlen, no. 14; 1946 Stockholm, Gothenburg & Malmö, no. 8; 1946 Copenhagen, no. 7; 1946-47 Liège, Brussels & Mons, no. 33; 1947 Paris, no. 33; 1947 Geneva, no. 33; 1947 Groningen, no. 16; 1947-48 London, Birmingham & Glasgow, no. 10; 1948 Bergen & Oslo, no. 5; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 29; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 2; 1951 Arles, no. 2; 1952 Enschede, no. 5; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 10; 1953 The Hague, no. 42; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 24; 1953-54 Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Toledo, no. 31; 1954 Zürich, no. 9; 1954-55 Willemstad, no. 1; 1955 Palm Beach, Miami & New Orleans, no. 1; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 45; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 18; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 8; 1956 Leeuwarden, no. 8; 1957 Breda, no. 23; 1957 Marseilles, no. 7; 1957 Nuenen, no catalogue; 1957-58 Leiden & Schiedam, no. 1; 1958 Deventer, no. 1; 1958 Mons, no. 1; 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 8; 1960 Amsterdam, no. 13; 1965 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1968-69 London, no. 20; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 7a; 1971-72 Paris, no. 11; 1987-88 Den Bosch, no. 90; 1988 Rome, no. 14; 1998-99 Washington & Los Angeles, no. 11.



40b *The vicarage at Nuenen* (F 1343  
JH 951). Private collection.

<sup>1</sup> See letter 493/398 and Louis van Tilborgh, 'Aanwinsten: brief van Willemien van Gogh,' *Van Gogh Bulletin* 7 (1992), no. 3, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> See letters 496/400, 504/407 and 449/368.

<sup>3</sup> See De Brouwer 1984, pp. 17-21.

<sup>4</sup> The window is hidden in the painting by the right-hand tree in front of the house. On the

plastering see J.C. Jegerings, 'De muurankers van de Nederlands-Hervormde Pastorie te Nuenen,' De Drijehornickels 6 (May 1997), p. 9.

5 See J.C. Traas's bill from early 1930 (inv. b 4208 V/1962): 'relined, cleaned, retouched, varnished, with a new stretcher.'

6 See Maureen Trappeniers in *Den Bosch 1987-88*, p. 226.

7 The vicarage is depicted in two other works as well, a drawing and a painting, respectively (F 1343 JH 475 and F 183 JH 952). Both show the house from the garden side rather than the front. The drawing belonged to Vincent's sister, Elisabeth. The painting remained unfinished and was among the works Van Gogh left with his mother when he departed for Antwerp.

8 Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 303, was the first to date the painting to October-November 1885.

In London 1968-69, p. 32, Alan Bowness claimed it had been executed in early 1884, but given the autumn leaves this cannot be the case.

9 See letter 538/427. We know from letter 548/437 that Vincent took not only three large paintings (see cat. 42, fn. 20) but also several smaller works with him to Antwerp; here he speaks of 'een paar kleintjes' ('a few little things').

Van Gogh's usual scenes of rustic peasant life. This has led some to suspect that the picture was meant to be a kind of souvenir for Theo.<sup>6</sup> Typically, the same motif reappears in a drawing that belonged to Vincent's sister, Willemien (fig. 40b).<sup>7</sup> The sheet appears to be a sort of preliminary sketch, and the artist probably had it on hand while finishing his canvas. In any case, it is interesting to note that the branches and leaves to the right are indicated with a rounded stroke quite similar to that found in tree at the left in the drawing.

We do not know exactly when the picture was painted. It is not mentioned in the surviving correspondence. The stiffness of the paint layer indicates that it was probably executed sometime between September and early October 1885.<sup>8</sup> The still lifes with birds' nests have a similarly worked-over surfaces (see *cat. 39*). We can, however, be certain that the view of the vicarage was painted before Van Gogh's visit to Amsterdam at the beginning of October. This trip brought about considerable changes in his working method, making it more spontaneous and free (see *cats. 41* and *42*).

It is not entirely clear how *The vicarage at Nuenen* ended up with Theo. Van Gogh may have taken it with him to Antwerp in November 1885 and then to Paris the following year.<sup>9</sup> It seems more reasonable, however, to assume that it was included in the third shipment to his brother, sent at the beginning of October. Vincent described this consignment as 'crate V4 with the still lifes' [538/427], but considering that it also included views of Amsterdam (see *cat. 41*) it is not impossible that it contained this work as well.



40 The vicarage at Nuenen

## 41 The De Ruijterkade in Amsterdam

AMSTERDAM, 8 OCTOBER  
1885

Oil on panel  
20.3 × 27.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 85 V/1962  
F 211 JH 973

TECHNICAL DATA

Mahogany panel, slightly bevelled edges. Cream-coloured ground, artist primed (?), thin. Brush size: very narrow and narrow. Varnished. Details: fingerprints.

PROVENANCE

October 1885-91 T. van Gogh;  
1891-1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62 V.W. van Gogh; 1962 Vincent van Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on loan to the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

LETTERS

537/426, 538/427.

LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 63, vol. 2, pl. LVI; De la Faille 1939, p. 181, no. 226; Tralbaut 1948, pp. 210-15, 283, no. 5; De la Faille 1970, pp. 108, 619; Hulsker 1980, pp. 214, 216; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 148-49, 322, no. 1.97; Groot/De Vries 1990, p. 117; Hulsker 1996, pp. 206, 208, 214.

Having lived in the little Brabant village of Nuenen for two years, Van Gogh began to feel the need to 'see paintings' in the autumn of 1885 [536/425]. At the beginning of October he decided to take a trip to Amsterdam, in order to visit the recently opened Rijksmuseum. He was in the city for three days – 6, 7 and 8 October – during which he painted 'two small panels' [537/426].<sup>1</sup> He described these as 'souvenirs of Amsterdam, caught on the run.' They were, as Vincent wrote in the same letter, 'done in a hurry, one – believe it or not – in the waiting room at the station when I was somewhat too early for the train, [and] the other one in the morning before I went to the museum around ten o'clock.' Along with the still lifes he had completed in September, he sent them to his brother around the middle of October, describing them as 'little tiles on which something has been thrown with the sweep of the brush' [537/426].<sup>2</sup>

The panels are *View of the Singel* (fig. 41a) and the Van Gogh Museum's *The De Ruijterkade in Amsterdam*.<sup>3</sup> The former depicts the Singel from the waiting room of the wooden temporary station on the Westerdokstraat, and must, therefore, be the picture executed on

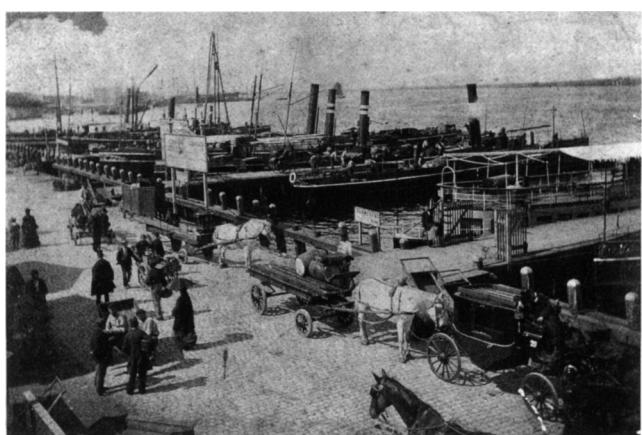


41a *View of the Singel* (F 113 JH 944).

1885. Amsterdam, Foundation P. and N. de Boer.

the day he was ‘too early for the train.’<sup>4</sup> That was 7 October, the second day of his visit, when he went to pick up his friend Anton Kerssemakers at the station, who was joining him from Eindhoven.<sup>5</sup> According to his memoirs, Kerssemakers spied the artist on his way out of the station, ‘at the front [...] by the window, industriously working on a couple of little cityscapes.’<sup>6</sup> Although Van Gogh certainly never worked on more than one panel at a time, when seen in combination with the letter to Theo cited above, we may nonetheless conclude that the artist painted at least one other picture in addition to *View of the Singel* that day – which was not, however, sent to his brother. This was likely the – now lost – *Centraal Station*, shown at the Oldenzeel gallery in Rotterdam in 1904, and was probably among the works Vincent left with his mother in 1885.<sup>7</sup>

If *View of the Singel* was executed on 7 October, then *The De Ruijterkade* was painted the following day – before Van Gogh set off for the museum ‘around ten o’clock’ [537/426]. Theoretically, it could also have been painted on the 6th, but this seems unlikely. At the very earliest, Van Gogh could have arrived in Amsterdam at 9:13 a.m., and the time left before the museum opened was hardly long enough to complete such a study, no matter how small.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, it is improbable that the painter went out in search of motifs around the station immediately upon arrival rather than setting off for his actual destination, the Rijksmuseum.<sup>9</sup> The De Ruijterkade is in the opposite direction, namely behind the station.



41b The De Ruijterkade. Amsterdam,  
Gemeentearchief.

#### EXHIBITIONS

- 1905 Amsterdam, no. 13  
[Dfl. 500]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 5  
[Dfl. 500]; 1905 Leiden, no. 5;
- 1906 Rotterdam, no. 1 [Dfl. 500];  
1906 Middelburg, no catalogue  
[Dfl. 500]; 1945 Amsterdam,  
unnumbered; 1946 Maastricht  
& Heerlen, no. 15; 1946 Stock-  
holm, Gothenburg & Malmö,  
no. 20; 1946 Copenhagen,  
no. 20; 1947 Groningen, no. 21;  
1948-49 The Hague, no. 32;
- 1953 The Hague, no. 46; 1953  
Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 48;
- 1953-54 Saint Louis, Philadelphia  
& Toledo, no. 52; 1955 Antwerp  
I, no. 117; 1955 Amsterdam,  
no. 56; 1957 Marseilles, no. 18;
- 1959-60 Utrecht, no. 10; 1963  
Antwerp, no. 38; 1980 Mons,  
no. 25; 1996 Vienna, no. 84;
- 1998-99 Enschede, no  
catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> According to this letter, which should be dated to 10 October, Vincent had ‘gone on Tuesday [and was] back on Thursday.’ He states that he was in Amsterdam ‘this week,’ leading to the conclusion that he was in the city from 6-8 October.

<sup>2</sup> On this shipment see letter 538/427.

<sup>3</sup> Vincent Willem van Gogh sold or gave *View of the Singel* (F 113 JH 944) to the entrepreneur W.J.R. Dreesmann, but it is not known when.

<sup>4</sup> On the topography see Groot/De Vries 1990, pp. 114-15. At the time, the station was located somewhat west of today’s Centraal Station, which was then under construction.

<sup>5</sup> Kerssemakers 1912, p. 6: ‘Because circumstances at home prevented me from staying away overnight, he [Vincent] went the day before and we agreed to meet the next morning in the third class waiting room.’

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> See Rotterdam 1904, no. 12. De la Faille’s 1970 catalogue raisonné proposes F 114 JH 945 as well as *View of the Singel* (F 113 JH 944) for the work shown. However, the first work is

not by Van Gogh (see the Appendix), while the second can hardly be said to depict the train station. View of the Singel was in Johanna van Gogh-Bonger's collection and was not lent to the exhibition. The building referred to is not the official Centraal Station, then under construction, but rather the temporary station located in the Westerdokstraat. On the provenance of the works shown at Oldenzeel's in 1903 and 1904 (see cat. 1).

8 The first train departed from Noord-Tongeleren in the direction of Boxtel at 6:34 a.m.; by changing in Boxtel and Utrecht, Van Gogh could have arrived at the Westerdok station at 9:13. With thanks to Alex J.H. Marion, curator of the Nederlands Spoorwegmuseum in Utrecht, who consulted the Reiswijzer of Maandelijksche opgave van alle Vervoermiddelen [...] 32 (October 1885), pp. 24-26, 44 on my behalf.

9 The order in which Van Gogh mentions the two paintings in letter 537/426 further supports the idea that The De Ruijterkade was painted after the View of the Singel.

10 On the location see Groot/De Vries 1990, pp. 116-17, with a map of 1886.

11 It rained heavily on 6 October and there were showers the next day; the weather remained bleak, but there was also some sunshine.

It became increasingly cloudy on 8 October and rained in the evening (information from the Klimatologische dienstverlening, De Bilt).

12 View of the Singel measures 19.0 × 25.5 cm. The De Ruijterkade is slightly larger.

13 According to Kerssemakers 1912, p. 6, Van Gogh had brought with him a 'little tin painter's box'; Kerssemakers described this in more detail in a letter to Johan Briedé (1885-1980), from 23 June 1914: 'a small painter's box [...] made of lacquered tin,' which came from 'Schoenfeld, Dusseldorf [sic]' (inv. b 1423 V/1962).

14 De la Faille erroneously believed the work shown in 1905 was not the Van Gogh Museum's painting but the View of the Singel (F 113 JH 944).

15 According to Tralbaut in 1948 (p. 211), they 'situated this corner of the port aroundt today's Loodshuis, with a view of the pronounced curve of the left bank.'

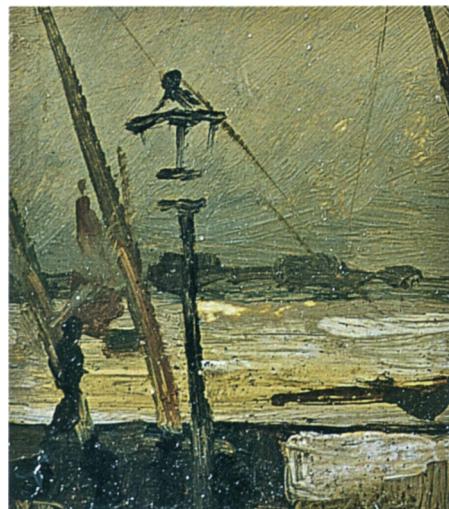
16 Groot/De Vries 1990, pp. 116-17.

17 W.H.N. Eggenkamp, 'Negentiende-eeuwse gietijzeren lantaarnpalen,' Heemschut (1983), no. 6, pp. 92 and 95.

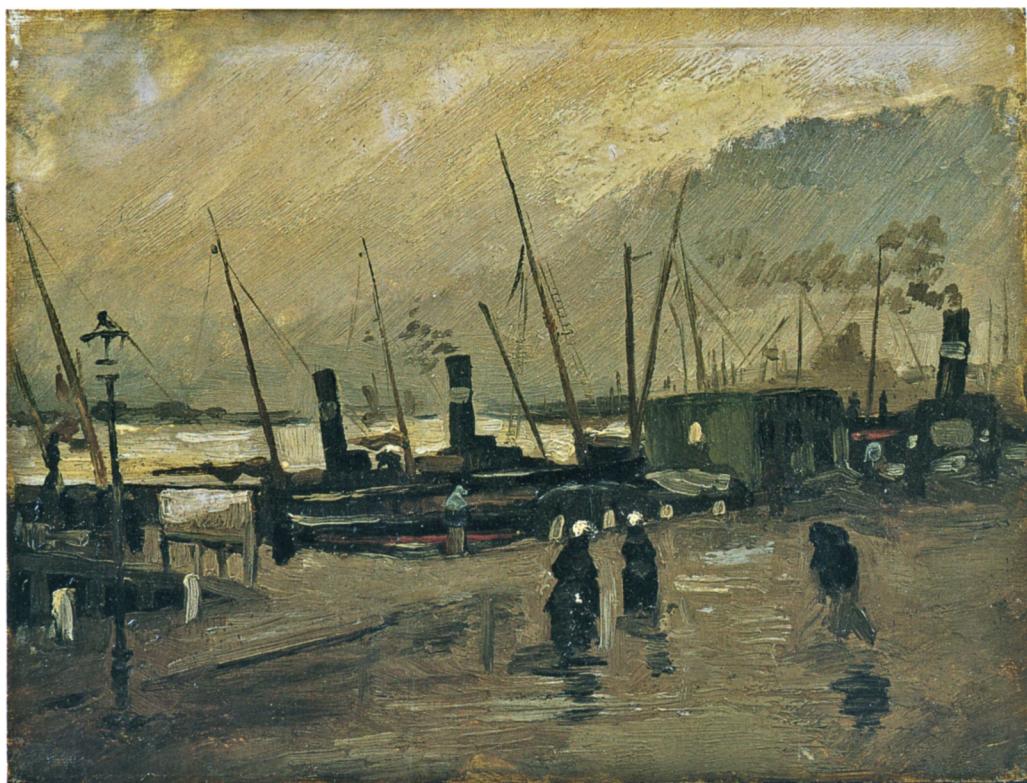
There were several cafés on the quay (presumably with rooms for rent) and the picture was probably painted in one of them.<sup>10</sup> It had been raining for several days, and the pavement is full of puddles.<sup>11</sup> Tugboats, barges and steamboats are shown moored in the IJ (fig. 41b). To the left, on the far shore, we catch a glimpse of Amsterdam Noord, and to the right in the distance lies the – slightly too large – Oosterkerk. On the quay to the left is a landing pier with a sign, probably listing the arrival and departure times. The bow of the ship next to it rises above the quay, which is enlivened with figures in both the fore- and background. We can make out a few people on the boats as well, nicely suggested with small, dark touches of paint (fig. 41c). Two women wear working-class caps; the man on the right, with his smock over his head, is a stevedore.

The two panels are not exactly the same size.<sup>12</sup> It was raining hard when Van Gogh departed for Nuenen on the evening of the 8th, and both works were damaged. 'The two little sketches from Amsterdam are, regrettably, quite spoiled,' he wrote to Theo, 'they got wet on the trip, and warped when they dried; they've also gotten dust in them, etc.' [538/427]. The surface is indeed very dirty and contains traces of what appears to be soot. There are a number of fingerprints along all the edges, except at the bottom.

The small format – a necessity of circumstance – was unusual for Van Gogh; nonetheless, he has created a strikingly believable image.



41c Detail of cat. 41.



41 The De Ruijterkade in Amsterdam

Because of the size, the artist used narrow brushes only – again with success, although his usual practice was to use wide ones.<sup>13</sup> For the ladders and moorings he even employed a brush with a single hair. He managed to capture the bleak weather perfectly, and numerous little details bear witness to his now-confident hand. The visit to the Rijksmuseum had awakened his admiration for the quick, spontaneous style of several artists, and he tried to put their lessons into practice here. Although the paintings were damaged, he still wanted to show Theo ‘that if I want to put down my impressions somewhere in an hour I can now do it, I have started to be able to do it in the same way others *analyse* their impressions – And give reasons for what they see. That is something quite different from feeling, I mean experiencing, impressions – there may be a big difference between experiencing impressions and – analysing them, *that is, taking them apart and putting them back together [...]*. But it’s a great thing to be able to capture something, as it were, on the run’ [538/427].

There is a horizontal indentation along the top of the paint layer, indicating that Theo framed the picture even before it was completely dry. He appears to have admired the work, as did his widow Johanna van Gogh-Bonger. She included it – and not *View of the Singel* (fig. 41a) – in the retrospective exhibition at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam in 1905, where it was entitled *View of a quay*



41<sup>d</sup> The Westerdokskade and the De Ruijterkade (right). Amsterdam, Gemeentearchief.

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*in Amsterdam.*<sup>14</sup> This description of the location, although correct, was later forgotten. De la Faille believed the painting depicted the port at Antwerp; later, experts on the city even thought they could identify the exact site.<sup>15</sup> The panel was only reincorporated into Van Gogh's Dutch œuvre by Groot and De Vries in 1990.<sup>16</sup> Their attribution is given further support by the gas lantern to the left, which is an Amsterdam model of 1867, as we see in a photograph depicting almost the same venue (fig. 41d).<sup>17</sup>

## 42 Stil life with Bible

OCTOBER 1885

Oil on canvas  
65.7 × 78.5 cm  
Signed at the lower left in  
orange-red: Vincent

Inv. s 8 V/1962  
F 117 JH 946

**TECHNICAL DATA**  
Canvas, 13 × 17 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original  
tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Cream-coloured ground,  
commercially primed, thick.  
Underdrawing (IRR). Brush size:  
very narrow to wide. Varnished.  
Details: paint fragments.

**PROVENANCE**  
1886-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-1925  
J.G. van Gogh-Bonger; 1925-62  
V.W. van Gogh; 1931-62 on loan  
to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1962 Vincent van  
Gogh Foundation; 1962-73 on  
loan to the Stedelijk Museum,  
Amsterdam; 1973 on permanent  
loan to the Van Gogh Museum,  
Amsterdam.

**LETTERS**  
540/429, 541/430, 545/434,  
549/438, 555/444, 556/445.

**LITERATURE**  
Bremmer 1926, pp. 86-87, no. 87;  
De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 42,  
vol. 2, pl. xxxi; Vanbeselaere  
1937, pp. 303, 383, 393, 399, 415;  
De la Faille 1939, p. 110, no. 121;  
Derkert 1946, pp. 117-19;  
Nordenfalk 1948, pp. 141-42;  
Graetz 1963, pp. 39-42;

Van Gogh painted this straightforward, seemingly effortless still life at the end of October 1885, not long after his exercises in ‘modelling in various colours’ [535/424] (see *cats. 30-39*).<sup>1</sup>

He regarded the work, quite correctly, as the culmination of his recent efforts, and wanted to let his brother know of this immediately: ‘I’m [sending] you a still life of an open, thus broken white, leather-bound Bible, set against a black background, with a yellow-brown foreground and just a hint of lemon yellow.

I painted it *in one go*, in a single day. This is to prove that when I say I haven’t studied so hard for nothing I mean it, because nowadays I can paint a given object, whatever its shape and colour, without hesitation’ [540/429].

The composition is dominated by the Bible with its bright copper corners and two clasps, one of which is in an upright position.<sup>2</sup> The heavy tome had been given to Vincent to send to Theo, but, having taken it with him to his studio at the home of the curate Schafrath, the artist first used it as a model for his still life.<sup>3</sup> The Bible, which has been preserved, is an 1882 reprint of a States Bible edition of 1712 (fig. 42b).<sup>4</sup> It had certainly belonged to their father, who died suddenly on 26 March 1885, but, as far as we know, this valuable book had no specific function in the Van Gogh household.<sup>5</sup> It was not the family Bible, as previously thought, nor was it a lectern Bible.<sup>6</sup> When the artist announced his intention to send it to Theo he thus spoke not of his father’s Bible but simply of ‘the Bible they gave me from home for you, which I’m using in a still life’ [541/430].

The Bible is open to the Book of Isaiah, with the heading written in French – ISAIE – at the top of the right-hand page. In the right-hand column we find the chapter number, again in French: ‘Chap LIII’ – chapter 53.<sup>7</sup> To the right is a candlestick with an extinguished candle and, below, a copy of Emile Zola’s *La joie de vivre*. This novel was published in 1884 and, although Van Gogh does not mention it specifically in his correspondence, we know indirectly that he had read it.<sup>8</sup> We may assume that the obviously



42 Still life with Bible

Bialostocki 1965, p. 184;  
 De la Faille 1970, pp. 82, 616;  
 Rosenblum 1975, p. 76;  
 Welsh-Ovcharov 1976, pp. 141-42;  
 Roskill 1979, pp. 161-63;  
 Takashina 1979, pp. 257-70;  
 Amsterdam 1980-81, pp. 102-113,  
 no. 128; Hamburg 1983-84,  
 pp. 572-73, no. 443; Amsterdam  
 1987, pp. 134-35, 322, no. 1.94;  
 Van Tilborgh 1988, n.p.;  
 Amsterdam 1990, pp. 54-55, no.  
 10; Kôdera 1990, pp. 43-45; Sund  
 1992, p. 109; Van Tilborgh 1994,  
 pp. 13-14; Hulsker 1996, pp. 187,  
 208; Ten Doesschate Chu 1996,  
 pp. 84, 87-88 Tokyo 1996,  
 p. 139, no. 4; Greer 1997,  
 pp. 30-42; Erickson 1998,  
 pp. 89-95.

#### EXHIBITIONS

1905 Amsterdam, no. 14  
 [Dfl. 1,000]; 1905 Utrecht, no. 6  
 [Dfl. 1,000]; 1911 Amsterdam,  
 no. 3 [not for sale]; 1913  
 The Hague, no. 12; 1920 New  
 York, no. 36 [\$12,000]; 1924  
 Basel, no. 2 (not for sale); 1924  
 Zürich, no. 10 (not for sale);  
 1924 Stuttgart, no. 3 (not for  
 sale); 1925 Paris 1, no. 1; 1925  
 The Hague, no catalogue [not for  
 sale]; 1926 The Hague, no. 117;  
 1926 Amsterdam, no. 3; 1926  
 London, no. 35; 1928 Berlin,  
 no. 6; 1928 Frankfurt am Main,  
 no. 3; 1928 Vienna, no. 3; 1928-  
 29 Hannover, Munich & Leipzig,  
 resp. no catalogue, no. 1, no cat.  
 known; 1929 Utrecht, no. 6 [not  
 for sale]; 1931 Amsterdam,  
 no. 18; 1937 Oslo, no. 3; 1938  
 Copenhagen, no. 5; 1946 Maas-  
 tricht & Heerlen, no. 18; 1946  
 Stockholm, Gothenburg & Malmö,  
 no. 17; 1946 Copenhagen, no. 16;  
 1946-47 Liège, Brussels & Mons,  
 no. 31; 1947 Paris, no. 31; 1947  
 Geneva, no. 31; 1947 Groningen,  
 no. 14; 1947-48 London, Birm-  
 ingham & Glasgow, no. 9; 1948  
 Bergen & Oslo, no. 4; 1948-49

well-read book belonged to him. Comparison of the painted version with early editions of the real book show that Van Gogh copied the information from the yellow cover exactly (author's name, title, place of publication). Nor did he forget the decorative framing device; the number of the edition and name of the publisher, however, are only vaguely suggested.

In terms of its iconography, this painting is rather unique. Some 17th-century Dutch *vanitas* still lifes include similarly large books, occasionally in combination with extinguished candles, but it seems unlikely that these were Van Gogh's source of inspiration.<sup>9</sup> This type of still life was rare, and the museums he had visited did not contain any examples at the time.

It seems, then, that the arrangement was his own invention, and there can be no doubt that its meaning was also extremely personal. Although Van Gogh's comments seem to indicate that the painting was nothing more than an exercise in colour and spontaneous brushwork, the combination of the Bible with a contemporary novel leads one to suspect otherwise.<sup>10</sup> In Vincent's mind, both books stood for specific ways of life; it would seem then that he intended here to explore a theme which occupied him from the time of his religious wanderings to the



42a Infrared reflectogram of cat. 42.

end of his life: whether or not the Bible had anything to offer mankind in the modern world.

Van Gogh was never able to answer this question unequivocally. On the one hand, he did not ‘care much for the Bible’; it did nothing but cause ‘despair and indignation,’ and he considered it to be ‘parochial,’ the Old Testament in particular [635/B8 and 636/B9]. On the other hand, it was only ‘right and proper to be moved by the Bible’ [824/B21], and he saw it as ‘still eternal and everlasting’ [187/161]. Although he formulated his thoughts slightly differently depending on the correspondent, it would seem that in Vincent’s eyes the Bible had lost much of its meaning – with the exception of the Gospels and, especially, the figure of Christ himself.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Van Gogh could be said to have placed a higher value on the naturalist novel, which described the problems of contemporary life. The Bible was beautiful, he wrote to his sister, Willemien, in 1887, but he found the ‘new even more beautiful, [...] because in it we are the actors, in our own time, and are only indirectly effected by either the past or the future’ [576/W1]. As he wrote in 1881, modern literature, which he initially associated with the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896) and Jules Michelet (1798-1874), stated ‘loud and clear all those things the Gospels only whisper to us [...],’ and it was thus ‘a continuation of the Gospels and not a repetition’ [187/161].

In *Still life with Bible*, modernity is symbolised by Zola’s *La joie de vivre*. From the outset, Van Gogh regarded the French realist as ‘the very best’ when it came to analysing contemporary life [398/333], and, although many scholars have sought a deeper meaning in the choice of this particular book, it seems more likely that the artist simply picked it at random.<sup>12</sup> It is a stand in for the naturalist novel in general, with, at most, the ironic title pointing to the ‘unmediated sadness’ [830/617] described within.<sup>13</sup> The Goncourts in ‘*Germinie Lacerteux*, *La fille Elisa*, Zola in *La joie de vivre* and *L’assommoir* and so many other masterpieces, describe life the way we feel it,’ as he wrote to Willemien in 1887 [576/W1].

Another meaningful detail in the painting is the reference to Isaiah 53. The suffering servant of the Lord described – ‘a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief [...] he was despised and we esteemed him not’ (Isaiah 53:3) – is usually seen as a

The Hague, no. 27; 1949  
Middelburg, no. 6; 1949-50 New York & Chicago, no. 10; 1950  
Hilversum, no. 5; 1951 Lyons & Grenoble, no. 4; 1951 Arles, no. 4; 1951-52 Nijmegen & Alkmaar, no. 3; 1952 Enschede, no. 7; 1952 Eindhoven, no. 9; 1953 The Hague, no. 40; 1953 Otterlo & Amsterdam, no. 26; 1953-54 Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Toledo, no. 33; 1954 Zürich, no. 3; 1954-55 Bern, no. 9; 1955 New York, no. 7; 1955 Antwerp 1, no. 60; 1955 Amsterdam, no. 31; 1955-56 Liverpool, Manchester & Newcastle-upon-Tyne, no. 6; 1956 Leeuwarden, no. 9; 1957 Breda, no. 27; 1957-58 Leiden & Schiedam, no. 6; 1958 Mons, no. 5; 1958-59 San Francisco, Los Angeles, Portland & Seattle, no. 11; 1960 Amsterdam, no. 12; 1960-61 Montreal, Ottawa, Winnipeg & Toronto, no. 17; 1961-62 Baltimore, Cleveland, Buffalo & Boston, no. 8; 1962-63 Pittsburgh, Detroit & Kansas City, no. 8; 1963 Humlebaek, no. 8; 1964 Washington & New York, no. 8; 1965 Charleroi & Ghent, no. 5; 1965-66 Stockholm & Gothenburg, resp. no. 9, no cat. known; 1967 Wolfsburg, no. 13; 1968-69 London, no. 53; 1969-70 Los Angeles, Saint Louis, Philadelphia & Columbus, no. 8; 1970-71 Baltimore, San Francisco & New York, no. 8; 1971-72 Paris, no. 8; 1972-73 Strasbourg & Bern, no. 3; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 128; 1983-84 Hamburg, no. 443; 1984 Nuenen, unnumbered; 1985-86 Tokyo & Nagoya, no. 55; 1986 Osaka, no. 36; 1990 Amsterdam, no. 10; 1996 Tokyo, no. 4; 1998-99 Amsterdam, no catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> The painting is mentioned in letter 540/429, dated by Hulsker 1993, p. 31, to late October.

<sup>2</sup> Van Gogh forgot to paint the closures at the left. Rosenblum 1975, p. 95, mistook the upright clasp for a second candle.

<sup>3</sup> In letter 541/430 Van Gogh announced his plan to send Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin* in 'the same crate with the studies – [and] also the Bible they gave me from home for you.'

<sup>4</sup> De gantsche H. Schrifture [...], Dordrecht and Amsterdam 1714. Jacob and Pieter Keur, and Pieter Rotterdam and Dieter Rotterdam de Jonge & Compagnie, reprinted: Arnhem (W.J. Gordon) 1882. On the provenance of the Bible see: Van Tilborgh 1988.

<sup>5</sup> On the endpaper we find the words, written later in pencil: 'Johannes Duyser Predikant te Helvoirt / Ths: van Gogh Laatst Predikant te Nunen 1885.' This inscription is unreliable, though: Duyser had died already in 1874, nine years before the reprint was published. Vincent probably never sent the Bible to his brother. It was supposed to be included in a crate with studies which, however, was not actually shipped (see letters 541/430 and 545/434). If the Bible did, in fact, remain behind in the studio in Nuenen, then it was probably returned to Vincent's mother, who took care of his things after he left for Antwerp. For more on the Bible's provenance see Van Tilborgh, *op. cit.* (note 4).

<sup>6</sup> Nordenfalk 1948, p. 142, was the first to refer to it as the family Bible, and many authors took their cue from him, among them, most recently, Linda Nochlin in *The body in piece: the fragment as a metaphor of modernity*, London 1994, p. 48. Considering the date of publication, however, this is impossible; it is also considerably too large. Equally, however, it was not a *kanselbijbel*, as the Protestants in Nuenen used the States Bible of 1748, which still belongs to the church today; see Nico Nagtegaal, 'Langs heilige huisjes,' *De Drijehornickels* 6 (August 1997), p. 39. The book was probably a gift to the reverend, given to him on some special occasion. One possibility might have been August 1882, when he was appointed to his post, but there is no evidence in the church council minutes that he received any gifts on that day. He was given a present by the churchwarden on 16 November 1884, after he had declined an invitation to preach in Helvoirt, but the nature of the gift is unknown (with thanks to Ton de Brouwer,

prefiguration of Christ and as such was an important element in Protestant belief. Here, however, Van Gogh appears to have sought to express something more personal, namely, his unusual and outspoken veneration for this biblical figure, who in his eyes represented God himself.<sup>14</sup> Jesus was the only 'solace in the otherwise so dispiriting Bible, [...] which pains and perplexes us so deeply with its narrow-mindedness and contagious stupidity – the consolation [...], like a pit surrounded by a hard rind and bitter fruit, that is Christ' [635/B8]. In other words, although the Bible could no longer meet the challenges of contemporary reality, it did offer a solution to the problem of how to conduct one's life, that is: by following the example of Christ.<sup>15</sup>

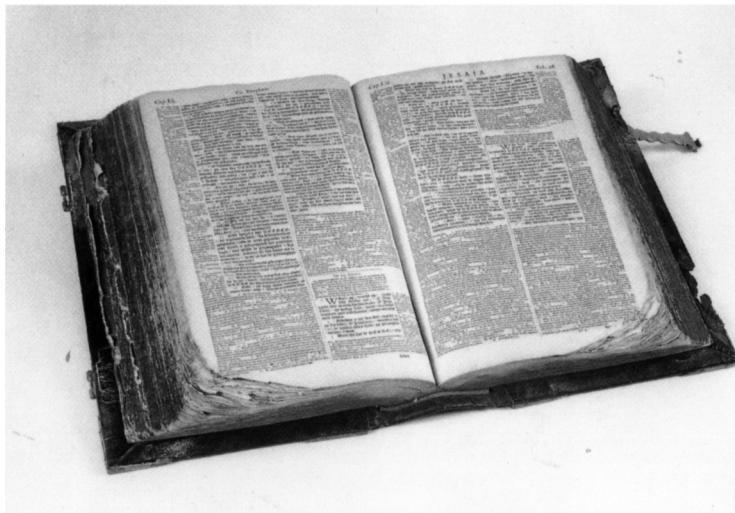
We can only speculate on the meaning of the extinguished candle. It adds nothing to the composition, and Van Gogh probably included it as a reference to his father's death at the end of March.<sup>16</sup> The two had many bitter discussions about the Christian faith, and thus about the Bible as well. Vincent believed his father's point of view was archaic and outmoded, concluding that he 'did not ever know, nor does he know now, nor will he ever know anything about the soul of modern civilisation' [405/339a].<sup>17</sup> The extinguished candle thus likely alludes not only to the death of his father but, above all, to the demise of his generation's ideas.

The painting has been carefully constructed. Van Gogh first sketched the composition directly over the ground. Some of these lines can still be made out with the naked eye, but an infrared reflectogram reveals still more (fig. 42a). It shows that the artist corrected the position of the Bible, painting it at a less oblique angle and thereby giving greater expressivity to the perspectival lines. The proportions of the Bible in relation to the novel are not quite right, but this was of little consequence to the artist – 'if they just look nice on the canvas the way they look in real life' – to borrow Van Gogh's own words, although on his use of colour [540/429].

The ground has been coated with a transparent brown paint, clearly visible everywhere except in the background. The still life was painted directly over this layer, with the tones of both the table and the Bible drawn from the same range. The light falls on the open Bible; the grey-white pages are subtly

enlivened by the brown of the underlayer and the tiny accents set in the complementary colours blue and orange. The brightest tone, however, is the yellow of the novel where it is struck by the light. The background is painted a very dark blue, which appears almost black. The candlestick was added somewhat later: it has no underdrawing nor was it blocked out in the underlayer. The words and numbers from Isaiah were painted in a second sitting, as was the signature – the underlying paint layer was already more or less dry. The imprint at the left indicates that the work was framed soon after it was finished. There are perceptible traces of other colours on the surface, mainly various shades of red.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to Van Gogh's other works from September and October 1885 (cats. 30-39), *Still life with Bible* is executed in a fluid and spontaneous style. 'Paint everything at once, as much as possible at one time' [538/427], he had impressed upon himself after his visit to the Rijksmuseum, where he had been particularly struck by the brisk manner of Rembrandt and, above all, Frans Hals. He had applied this lesson even during the trip (see cat. 41) and here he put it to the test once again, now with considerably



42<sup>b</sup> *De gantsche H. Schrifture [...]*,  
Arnhem 1882. Amsterdam, Van Gogh  
Museum, on loan from the Baptist and  
Remonstrant congregation in Leiden.

*Van Gogh Documentatiecentrum Nuenen*, letter  
of 20 July 1998).

7 Even now, the Bible falls open to this chapter; *Isaiah 53* is found in about the middle of the book. The corners are rather worn, but this probably occurred later, after it began to be used as a *kanselbijbel* by the Remonstrant congregation in Leiden; see *Van Tilborgh* 1994. The use of French rather than Dutch for the chapter heading certainly has to do with the canvas's original destination. He intended to send it to Theo, in the hope that the latter would show it to his art-dealer friends.

8 See letters 495/399 and 576/W1, in which the title is mentioned, and *Sund* 1992, p. 109.

9 17th-century Dutch vanitas still life are mentioned as a possible source by Nordenfalk 1948, p. 142. For an overview of this genre see Jacques Foucart, 'La peinture hollandaise et flamande de vanité: une réussite dans la diversité,' in Alain Tapié et al., exhib. cat.

Les vanités dans la peinture au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Méditations sur la richesse, le dénuement et la rédemption, Caen (*Musée des Beaux-Arts*) 1990, pp. 55-68.

10 Nordenfalk 1948, pp. 141-42, was the first to point this out; he was followed by many others, although not always equally convincingly.

A summary of more or less all the various interpretations of the painting can be found in Noll 1994, pp. 42-44, fn. 177. A new and valuable – if somewhat controversial – contribution was published by Greer in 1997.

11 Van Gogh's ideas about religion and the Bible clarified over time, but his basic opinions were already formed while he was still in the Netherlands; see especially letters 187/161; 576/W1; 635/B8; 636/B9; and 824/B21.

12 Beginning in 1882, Van Gogh had made a habit of reading all the French author's works, most recently *Germinal*. He had borrowed it from Theo, but had later returned it (letter 512/413). *La joie de vivre* was thus the newest Zola book on his shelf.

13 In letter 495/399, from April 1885, he speaks of "la joie (?) de vivre". The book is reproduced again in the *Still life with oleanders* of 1888 (F 592 JH 1566), where it is also meant to symbolise the despondency of the modern era.

14 Following Nordenfalk's lead (1948, pp. 141-42), this passage has often been interpreted as a reference to the difficulties Van Gogh had experienced as an artist. Greer 1997, pp. 32-35, however, has

convincingly shown that it should be seen instead in relation to his religious beliefs, in which the 'man of sorrows' plays an important role (see letters 129/109; 132/112; 134/114; 136/116; and 148/127). Without having read Greer's article, Erickson 1998, pp. 94–95, comes to more or less the same conclusions.

<sup>15</sup> According to Greer 1997, pp. 35–36 and Erickson 1998, p. 95, this was why the artist included Zola's *Joie de vivre*. Van Gogh is supposed to have viewed the main character, Pauline Quenu, as a modern Christ figure, but whether this was really the reason is certainly debateable (see fn. 12). Even less convincing is the notion that the chapter in *Isaiah* stood for Van Gogh's 'understanding of artistic creativity' (Greer 1997, p. 42). Van Gogh's ideas about how one should follow Jesus's example were mainly derived from Ernest Renan's *La vie de Jésus* of 1863; see Erickson 1998, pp. 80–86, and also 52–60.

<sup>16</sup> He used the same symbolism in a study of 1883 for an image of a dead woman (F 841 JH 359, and letter 339/280).

<sup>17</sup> See also letter 184/159: 'For example, when Pa sees me with French book in my hand, by Michelet or V. Hugo, he immediately thinks of arsonists and murderers and "indecency".'

<sup>18</sup> The work was treated by the restorer J.C. Traas in 1930: 'cleaned, relined, overpainting removed, retouched and varnished' (inv. b 4207 V/1962).

<sup>19</sup> This picture was shown at the retrospective of Manet's work held in 1884 at the Académie des Beaux-Arts in Paris (no. 24), but Theo may also have seen it at the home of the opera singer Jean-Baptiste Faure (1830–1914), who had bought it ten years before; see exhib. cat. Manet 1832–1883, Paris (Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais) & New York (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) 1983, no. 73.

<sup>20</sup> Until now, it has always been thought that the work was sent, but further study has revealed this is not the case. The two autumnal studies he planned to ship with the still life were F 44 JH 962 and F 45 JH 959 (see letter 540/429). The works he finally brought with him to Antwerp comprised 'A large mill on the moor at twilight, a view of a village behind a row of poplars with yellow leaves, a still life and a number of figure drawings' [545/434]. The first work has been lost, the second is F 45 JH 959; the drawings cannot be identified. Letter 548/437

more ambition, as evidenced by the extraordinarily daring passage of the tablecloth at the right, so clearly inspired by Hals (fig. 42c). Remarkable, too, is the brighter palette, a concession to Theo, who had recommended he give his works a less sombre coloration. Although his 'palette [had] thaw[ed]' [540/429] since his journey to Amsterdam, he remained true to his dark colours despite Theo's protests. He even presented this still life, with its dark background, as an answer to his brother's most recent letter, in which Theo had been forced to admit that even among the impressionists black was not completely scorned, as demonstrated by Manet's *Dead toreador* (Washington, DC, The National Gallery of Art).<sup>19</sup> Unlike his previous still lifes (cats. 30–39), here the colour functions mainly as a contrast, the black serving to emphasise the lighter foreground.

Although Van Gogh announced his intention to send Theo the painting, he never did. Initially, he had planned to ship it together with one of his recently completed autumnal studies,



42c Frans Hals, *The merry drinker*, c. 1628–30. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

but when he decided to go Antwerp in the middle of November 1885 he apparently changed his mind. He told Theo he would ‘take a few paintings’ with him to his new home, namely ‘those I would otherwise have sent you [...]’ [545/434]; among them was the *Still life with Bible*.<sup>20</sup> He hoped to find a dealer in Belgium who would sell them, and at the beginning of December he wrote that he had ‘given those things I brought [to two dealers] on commission’ [549/438]. This clearly led to nothing, and in January 1886 he deposited the pictures – ‘two landscapes and one still life’ – along with two recently finished portraits ‘at the academy with Verlat,’ whose painting class he hoped to join [555/444].<sup>21</sup> A few months later he took the still life with him to Paris. In the period that followed he painted a number of pictures which include books, thereby demonstrating that the *Still life with Bible* was in no way foreign to his artistic project.<sup>22</sup>

further indicates that he took ‘a few little things’ as well.

<sup>21</sup> See also letter 556/445, which states that Verlat barely paid any attention to them.

<sup>22</sup> F 335 JH 1226; F 358 JH 1612; F 359 JH 1332; F 360 JH 1349; F 393 JH 1362; and F 593 JH 1566.

## 43 Still life with vegetables and fruit

LATE OCTOBER-  
NOVEMBER 1885

Oil on canvas  
32.3 × 43.2 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 70 V/1970  
F 103 JH 928

**TECHNICAL DATA**  
 Canvas, 14 × 18 (medium)  
 threads, medium weave, edges  
 cropped, wax resin lining,  
 formerly canvas on cardboard.  
 Cream-coloured ground,  
 commercially primed, medium.  
 Traces of underdrawing. Brush  
 size: varying from very narrow  
 to medium. Varnished. Details:  
 weave imprints, pinholes, finger  
 prints.

**PROVENANCE**  
 1885/86-91 T. van Gogh; 1891-  
 1925 J.G. van Gogh-Bonger;  
 1925-70 V.W. van Gogh; after  
 1931-70 on loan to the Stedelijk  
 Museum, Amsterdam; 1970  
 Vincent van Gogh Foundation;  
 1970-73 on loan to the Stedelijk  
 Museum, Amsterdam; 1973 on  
 permanent loan to the Van  
 Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.

**LITERATURE**  
 De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 38,  
 vol. 2, pl. XXVIII; Vanbeselaere  
 1937, pp. 302, 415; De la Faille  
 1939, p. 105, no. III; De la Faille  
 1970, pp. 78, 615; Amsterdam  
 1987, p. 321, no. I.89; Hulsker  
 1996, pp. 198, 204-05.

Because of its coloration, facture and rather static composition, *Still life with vegetables and fruit* has a special place within the group of Nuenen still lifes. Until now the picture has been dated to September 1885, along with all the other still lifes of potatoes and fruit.<sup>1</sup> This assumption was thought to be confirmed by Vincent's remark from the end of the month, already cited (see *cats. 30-34* and *35*): 'I have a few still lifes for you – a basket of potatoes, fruit, a brass cauldron, etc.' [535/424]. There is, however, no evidence that the unspecified 'fruit' in this list in any way relates to the work here under discussion. It seems far more likely that Van Gogh was here speaking of the baskets of apples (or the bowl of pears) he did, in fact, paint in September.<sup>2</sup> All these still lifes have a sober palette of primarily earth tones, and should be viewed mainly as studies in tone rather than colour. This is not true of *Still life with vegetables and fruit*, where the artist has used bright, vivid colours in complementary contrast.

It is precisely this striking use of colour which leads to the suspicion that the picture was painted one or two months later. After all, Van Gogh did write in a letter from the end of October that 'At the moment my palette is thawing and the severity of the



43a Detail of cat. 43.



43 Still life with vegetables and fruit

## EXHIBITIONS

1947 Groningen, no. 12; 1948-49 The Hague, no. 23; 1954 Dordrecht, ex catalogue; 1980-81 Amsterdam, no. 127.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *De la Faille and Hulsker, in all the editions of their œuvre catalogues, as well as Vanbeselaere 1937 and Amsterdam 1987.*

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of these still lifes with baskets of potatoes and apples see cats. 30-34. The still life of pears is F 105 JH 926.

<sup>3</sup> He read this passage in W. Thoré-Bürger's *Trésors d'art en Angleterre*. The edition cited here is Paris 1865, p. 394. Vincent quoted it in his last letter from Nuenen, 546/435.

<sup>4</sup> This fragment of underdrawing is visible with the naked eye. Examination with infrared reflectography revealed nothing further.

<sup>5</sup> Bill from J.C. Traas to V.W. van Gogh (inv. b 4208 V/1962): 'Still life with vegetables [a.o.]. Cardboard removed // relined // cleaned, retouched where necessary and varnished // all with new stretcher[s], f 11.50 each.' V.W. van Gogh dated the bill 2 January 1930. The restoration must therefore have taken place at the end of 1929.

<sup>6</sup> Letter 545/434: 'Or – what I forgot to mention in my last letter, among the things I could actually do "in addition" – give lessons, letting [the students] start by painting still lifes – I think that's a different method from the drawing teachers. – I already tried it out with my friends in Eindhoven, and I would dare to do the same again.'

<sup>7</sup> See letter 548/437.

early days is gone' [540/429]. This in turn inspired him to immerse himself in colour theory again, as we know from a letter from the beginning of November. Following the mention of two studies of autumn leaves – 'one in yellow (poplars), the other in orange (oak)' – he noted: 'All of a sudden I'm preoccupied with the laws of colour' [541/430].

The brisk manner in which the work is painted – the objects have not been carefully built up from a lower tone but rather set down directly in their actual colour – also points to a date later than mid-October. Thanks to his visit to Amsterdam in the second week of the month and the paintings he had seen there, Van Gogh had developed a new appreciation for pictures that appeared to have been quickly executed. He wrote of how impressed he was by the facility of painters such as Frans Hals and Rembrandt: the fact that 'these great masters [...] put as much as possible into their *premier coup* – and didn't work it over too much afterwards' was very appealing to him [538/427]. At the end of October he wrote on this issue again, this time in connection with the *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42), which had been painted in a single day. He intended this work to show Theo that he was now so advanced that he could create forms and use colour 'without hesitating.' [540/429]. Shortly before leaving for Antwerp he returned to the subject again, after about Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788).<sup>3</sup> Wilhelm Bürger (the pseudonym of the French writer Théophile Thoré), whom Van Gogh greatly admired, had written that the English painter concentrated above all on the effect of the whole in his paintings, laying them in and working them up without paying undue attention to particularities. Van Gogh clearly felt very drawn to this approach.

Like Gainsborough, Van Gogh appears to have been striving for an overall effect in the *Still life with vegetables and fruit*. Following the first quick design he used touches of dark and light to give his forms more volume, without, however, getting caught up in the details. The still life has been painted wet-into-wet, using rather fluid paint, applied very thickly in places and thus making a rather 'drippy' impression in certain areas, such as the lower left corner and in the cabbage. This method was very different from Van Gogh's usual way of working, carefully building up his compositions from the middle tones or laying in the design in coloured passages with thin paint, and he probably felt somewhat insecure. Traces of charcoal indicate that he may have made an underdrawing of the

composition; this was certainly the case with the other work in this style, the *Still life with Bible* (cat. 42). The charcoal can be seen most clearly on a portion of unpainted primer between the pear and the apple above the cabbage.<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the majority of the Nuenen still lifes, here the objects are arranged rather formally. The three pieces of fruit to the left are slightly raised, perhaps resting on a small chopping block. The cabbage in front is the most worked up and meticulous part of the whole composition. Van Gogh accurately captured its appearance and character using dynamic brushstrokes (fig. 43a). The green makes a strong contrast to the orange-yellow fruit nearby.

The strong shadows cast to the left indicate that the composition was brightly lit from the upper right. Thanks to the accurate rendering of dark and light, the perspective of the whole is convincing. Only the green apple to the left on the block seems a bit cramped.

As with many other paintings in the Van Gogh Museum, this canvas, too, was once laid on cardboard. This stiff support was removed by J.C. Traas in 1929 and the work relined.<sup>5</sup> The paint layer is cut through on all sides, suggesting that the canvas was slightly cropped at one time – perhaps during the same treatment. There are little holes in all four corners, indicating that the still life was tacked up after being painted. On both the upper left and the lower right we find Van Gogh's fingerprints, the result of moving the still-wet picture.

The last time Vincent sent work to Theo from Nuenen was in mid-October 1885. Since, however, *Still life with vegetables and fruit* was probably painted later but nonetheless ended up in the family's collection, the artist probably took it with him to Antwerp. This suggests that Van Gogh found the picture important, probably as an experiment in colour. He may have planned to use it in the art lessons he was thinking of giving.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it was one of the 'few little things' he mentions in a letter to Theo from Belgium, at the end of a list of paintings he had taken with him when he left Brabant.<sup>7</sup>

## 44 Flying fox

LATE OCTOBER-  
LATE NOVEMBER 1885

Oil on canvas  
41.5 × 79.0 cm  
Unsigned

Inv. s 136 V/1973  
F 177a JH 1192

**TECHNICAL DATA**  
Canvas, 18 × 22 (medium)  
threads, medium weave, original  
tacking edges, wax resin lining.  
Original stretcher (?). Cream-  
grey ground, commercially  
primed, medium. Brush size:  
medium and wide. Varnished.

**PROVENANCE**  
?-1904 Kunstzalen Oldenzeel,  
Rotterdam; 1904?-51 A.F. Philips,  
Eindhoven; 1951-70 A.H.E.M.  
Philips-de Jongh, Eindhoven;  
1970-73 F.J. Philips, Eindhoven;  
1973 bought by the Vincent  
van Gogh Foundation; on  
permanent loan to the Van Gogh  
Museum, Amsterdam.

**LITERATURE**  
De la Faille 1970, pp. 100, 178-  
79, 618; Welsh-Ovcharov 1976,  
p. 229; Amsterdam 1987, p. 328,  
no. 1.129; Glasgow 1990-91,  
pp. 133-34, no. 24; Catalogue  
1995, p. 185; Hulsker 1996,  
pp. 256, 262.

**EXHIBITIONS**  
1904 Rotterdam, no. 36; 1978  
Bordeaux, no. 165; 1990-91  
Glasgow, no. 24; 1991 Amster-  
dam, no. 39; 1998-99 Wash-  
ington & Los Angeles, no. 19.

This painting depicts an unusual subject for Van Gogh: a tropical bat. It floats freely in space, creating the impression of flight.

However, it is equally obvious that the creature hanging in the air is not alive but stuffed: it appears stiff and unnatural, its wings and claws sticking straight out. It belongs to the order of *Megachiroptera* – fruit-eating bats, which live only in Indo-Australia and Africa.<sup>1</sup> There are many sub-species, but without knowing the original size of Van Gogh's example, there is no way of telling to which of these the bat actually belongs. The most likely appears to be the *Pteropus*, the kalong or flying fox, which has no tail.<sup>2</sup>

For centuries, stuffed bats were brought back to western Europe from the tropics as curios, and Van Gogh probably painted after some such model. As Anton Kerssemakers noted, the artist had 'a few stuffed birds' in his studio, but we do not know if he meant the bat was included among them.<sup>3</sup> It is possible that the specimen belonged to his friend from Eindhoven, the retired goldsmith Antoon Hermans.<sup>4</sup> He had a large collection of exceptional and strange objects, among them a group of 300 'stuffed rare birds and animals'.<sup>5</sup>

Van Gogh painted the *Flying fox* wet-into-wet, working alternately with a broad brush on the background and the animal itself. The trick was to capture the transparency of the wings, and the artist appears to have placed a light source behind his model. The background is painted mainly in dark brown, with a single touch of blue, and the wings are done in bright orange and yellow. To enliven the whole, Van Gogh used a complementary green in both the wings and the background.

The picture was painted over another, partially scraped-off image. Raking light reveals deviant brushstrokes around the bat's head. The underlying layer includes a bright, light blue, visible where the paint has been lost and at the edges of the canvas, but it is not possible to determine whether the overpainted work was a landscape with a blue sky. The x-ray tells us nothing more: all we see here are large, indistinct passages with no obvious structure.



44 Flying fox

<sup>1</sup> Letter from W. Bergmans, Stichting Natura Artis Magistra, Amsterdam, 13 August 1998.

<sup>2</sup> Kalongs – Javanese for ‘flying fox’ – can have wingspans of up to 1.50 metres. De la Faille 1970, p. 178, gives the title Kalong, based on a report by J.W. Sluijter, Zoologisch Laboratorium der Rijksuniversiteit Utrecht, 3 November 1967.

<sup>3</sup> Kerssemakers 1912, p. 6. We also know that Van Gogh wanted to ‘do sketches of stuffed herons and other water birds,’ and that to this end Kerssemakers had introduced him to Joseph van der Harten (see the letter from Van der Harten to A. Plasschaert, 16 May 1912, inv. b 3032 V/1983), who had a collection of mounted birds.

<sup>4</sup> In the autumn of 1884, Van Gogh had borrowed objects from Hermans for still lifes; see cat. 9.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted from the auction catalogue of Hermans’s collection (see cat. 9, fn. 12). In addition to Van der Harten, Jack van Hoek mentions a number of others in Van Gogh’s circle who could have owned similar prepared bats from Indonesia; see *idem*, ‘Nuenen of Parijs: De lokalisatie en datering van twee schilderijen van Van Gogh herziend,’ *De Drijehornickels* 3 (December 1994), pp. 76-79 and 4 (May 1995), pp. 21-24.

<sup>6</sup> See De la Faille 1970, pp. 100, 178.

<sup>7</sup> F 28 JH 1191, F 1373v JH 1189 and F 1373r JH 1190.

<sup>8</sup> Hulsker already had doubts about the dating; see *idem* 1996, p. 262.

<sup>9</sup> The label from Oldenzeel’s has been preserved and is still stuck to the stretcher, which is probably original. The work was listed as number 36 in the ‘Hollandsch tijdperk’ section of the show. The exhibition did include 14 works from Van Gogh’s French period, but these were listed separately in the catalogue. Problematic, however, is the fact that some of the Dutch paintings on display are now considered unauthentic. Several works – among them F 14 JH 1193 and F 177 JH 543 – were even suspect at the time; see Giovanni, ‘De Vincent van Gogh-tentoonstelling. II,’ *Algemeen Handelsblad* (July 1905); A.C.L[offelt], *Nieuws van den Dag* (7 August 1905; and N.H. Wolf, ‘Van Gogh-Tentoonstelling,’ *De kunst* (13 and 20 September 1930).

<sup>10</sup> The Oldenzeel exhibition consisted mainly of works Van Gogh had left behind with his mother in 1885 (see cat. 1), but it is not clear if this

Various dates have been proposed for the *Flying fox*. It was not included in De la Faille’s first two œuvre catalogues (1928 and 1939), and is only mentioned in the manuscript for the revised edition. Here the date is given as Nuenen 1885, but the editors later changed this to Paris 1886.<sup>6</sup> Their decision was probably based on the use of bright colours, and the fact that Van Gogh did several drawings and one painting after stuffed birds while in the French capital.<sup>7</sup> The provenance of the work, however, makes this date practically impossible:<sup>8</sup> the painting first surfaced in 1904, at the exhibition organised by the Kunstuilen Oldenzeel in Rotterdam, which consisted solely of works from Van Gogh’s Dutch period.<sup>9</sup>

Although the provenance seems to point to a date at the end of November 1885,<sup>10</sup> some aspects of the work itself give cause for doubt. The type of canvas used and the cream-grey ground are atypical for the period (that is, not found elsewhere in the works in the Van Gogh Museum). The format, too, is unusual for Nuenen, but probably resulted from the exceptional motif. The supple and spontaneous touch has great affinity with the quickly executed portraits done in Antwerp – although he had already experimented with this technique following his visit to the Rijksmuseum in early October (see cat. 42). The vivacious handling of the background lies somewhere between the somewhat sloppy, almost disinterested execution of these passages in the Nuenen works and the varied brushwork found in the Parisian flower still lifes.<sup>11</sup> The green and orange have been applied undiluted, and this more brilliant coloration is only encountered in the very last works from the Brabant period (see cat. 43).<sup>12</sup> We may thus conclude, although with caution, that the *Flying fox* was painted at just this time, when Van Gogh was reorienting both his palette and style prior to his move to Antwerp.

The striking use of colour and the curious subject led the critics to wax lyrical in 1904. ‘The wings are as glorious as autumn leaves,’ wrote the *Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant*, and: ‘That creature, that nervous, spindly, hooked creature, with its gruesome little head, grasping claws and flapping wings – that creature which seems to crucify itself – a devil, an outcast and rogue; a poor wretch, that can do nothing but frighten and then flee out of fear; a monster, but one whose beautiful autumnal wings bringing light to the darkness.’<sup>13</sup> The writer Israël Querido (1872-1932) was so impressed that he later used the *Flying fox* as a symbol for Van Gogh himself: ‘If we regard him in relation to his snivelling

colleagues, he becomes his own painted “Vampire”: he is the demonic golden fire in its wings; he is that phantom animal, with its macabre claws and membranous devilishness, sunk into its primordial fear, buried in its golden, glowing, infernal cloak.<sup>14</sup>

Following the exhibition in Rotterdam, the painting was bought by the Dutch industrialist Anton Frederik Philips (1874–1951), founder of the company of the same name. As a collector, he was mainly interested in the work of the Hague School, but was apparently not averse to exceptions.<sup>15</sup> His heirs sold the picture to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation in 1973.

painting was among them. In contrast to the majority of works in the show, the Flying fox is not laid on panel, nor do we find the typical red-brown paper at the edges (see cat. 2, fn. 31).

<sup>11</sup> The brushwork is best compared with the background at the upper right in the Still life with asters (F 197 JH 1167) of 1885. This picture is usually dated to Paris 1886, but this is an error; see cat. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Pure colours are also used in the Avenue of poplars (F 45 JH 959), dating from November 1885, but tradition has it that Van Gogh retouched this picture in Paris. Closer analysis produced no evidence either for or against this hypothesis; see Pien van der Werf, ‘Materieel onderzoek van het populierenlaantje bij Nuenen in de herfst,’ Groningen 1991, unpublished research paper.

<sup>13</sup> Anonymous, ‘Letteren en Kunst. Oldenzeel. Vincent,’ Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant (27 November 1904).

<sup>14</sup>. I. Querido, Literatuur en kunst, Haarlem 1906, p. 187. Querido’s description of the bat as a ‘vampire’ is based on the catalogue of the 1904 exhibition (implicitly suggesting that it was of the meat-eating variety).

<sup>15</sup> P.J. Bouman, Anton Philips, de mens, de ondernemer, Amsterdam 1966, p. 67. His collection also included F 278 JH 1103, a still life; today’s owners, the Kröller-Müller Museum in Otterlo, now regard this work (correctly) as unauthentic.

# Appendix

## *Rejected work*

### VIEW OF THE IJ

Oil on canvas on panel  
35.0 × 47.0 cm  
Signed at the lower right in red-brown: Vincent

Inv. s 364 M/1982  
F 114 JH 945

#### TECHNICAL DATA

Canvas, 14 × 13 (fine) threads, medium weave, edges cropped, bevelled oak panel. Cream-coloured ground, commercially primed, medium. Brush size: varying from narrow to wide, palette knife. Varnished. Details: weave imprints, pinhole.

#### PROVENANCE

Before 1914-36 A. Hahnloser, Winterthur; 1936-82 H.R. Hahnloser, Bern; 1982 bought by the Van Gogh Museum with the support of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation via Galerie Nathan, Zürich.

#### LITERATURE

De la Faille 1928, vol. 1, p. 41, vol. 2, pl. xxxi; Vanbeselaere 1937, pp. 303, 383, 415; De la Faille 1939, p. 115, no. 129; De la Faille 1970, pp. 81, 616; Hulsker 1980, pp. 204, 208; Amsterdam 1987, pp. 350, 365; Groot/De Vries 1990, pp. 114-15; Catalogue 1995, pp. 166-67; Hulsker 1996, p. 208.

#### EXHIBITIONS

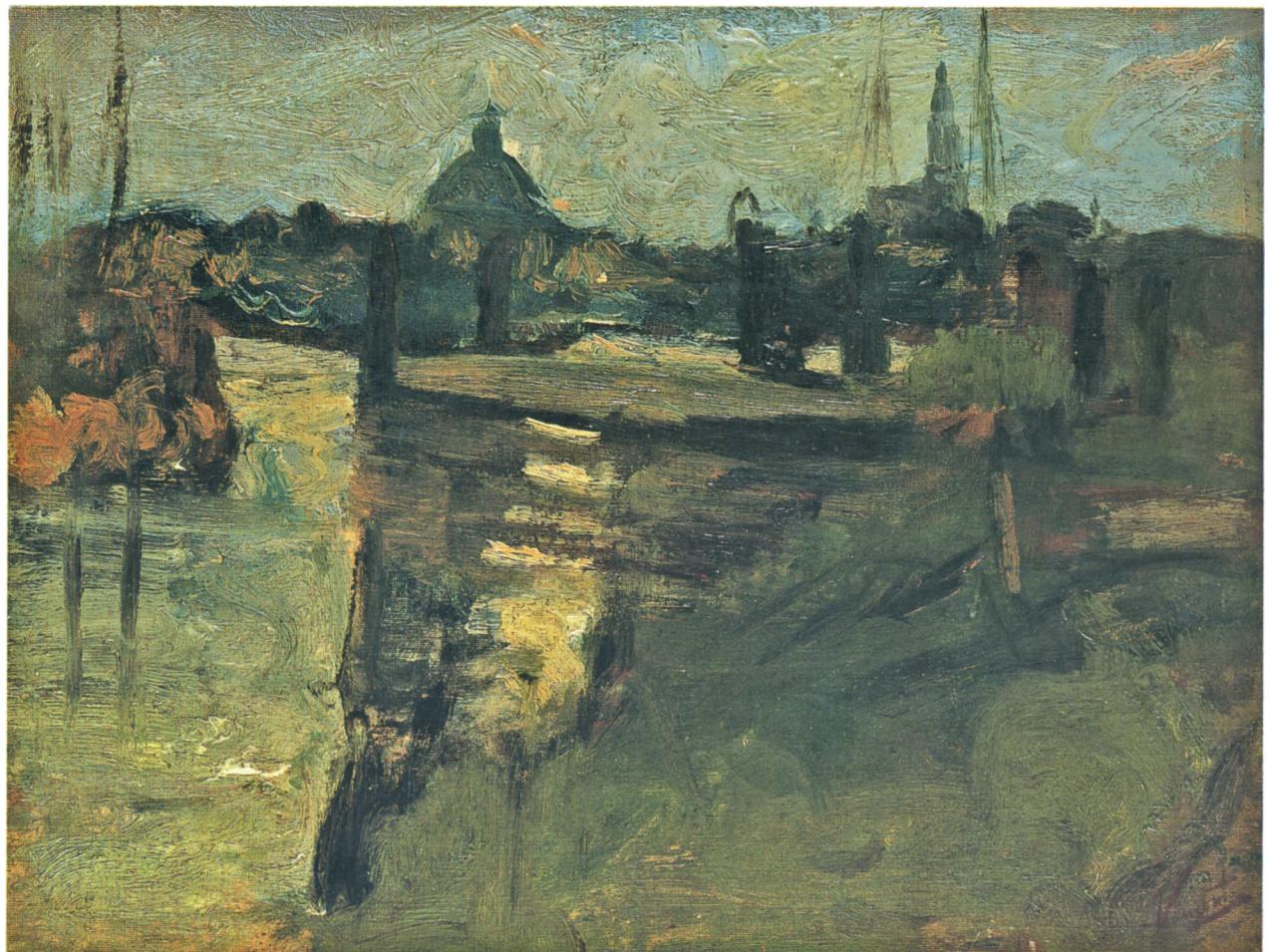
1924 Zürich, no. 11 (not for sale); 1938 Paris, no. 121a; 1940 Luzern, no. 52.

During his visit to Amsterdam in early October 1885, Van Gogh painted ‘two small panels’ [537/426]. These works, executed ‘on the run,’ have been preserved: *View of the Singel* (fig. 41a) and *The De Ruijterkade in Amsterdam* (cat. 41). The former has been associated with the passage in the letter from the very beginning, but not, however, the latter. In 1928, De la Faille’s candidate for the second work was the picture examined here.

This view is not, however, painted on panel; nor is it particularly small, as Vanbeselaere already noted in 1937.<sup>1</sup> Despite this, the identification remained firmly entrenched for quite some time.<sup>2</sup> In 1982, when the Van Gogh Museum purchased the painting, the letter connection was dismissed, and it was even thought the picture might have been executed in Antwerp.<sup>3</sup> Shortly thereafter the discussion became superfluous: the cityscape was rejected on stylistic grounds.<sup>4</sup>

The frankly indistinct style is, indeed, a far cry from Van Gogh’s usual manner. Everything appears formless and, in contrast to his work, the actual space is difficult to define. The picture is signed, but does not appear to be a deliberate falsification: the signature – a good, if not exact imitation, and not executed in one stroke – is painted over the first layer of varnish.<sup>5</sup> Paint from the underlining can be found in the already extant craquelure.

Although De la Faille mistook the work for authentic, his identification of the picture as a view of Amsterdam appears to be correct. As in the *View of the Singel*, we find the dome of the Lutheran Church, only now painted from a completely different location, i.e. from the opposite shore of the IJ (see fig.).<sup>6</sup> The painting was begun somewhere near the ‘Bewaarplaats voor Petroleum’ (petroleum tanks), on the banks of today’s Buiker-slootkanaal. In the centre we see a jetty and to the right some rather ill-defined greenery, probably the park near the Tolhuis (Customs House). In the right background is the Westertoren, flanked – too closely – by the masts of the ships on the IJ.



View of the IJ

<sup>1</sup> Vanbeselaere 1937, p. 303.

<sup>2</sup> It was uncritically accepted by the editors of De la Faille's catalogue in 1970; Jan Hulsker, too, later concurred, albeit reluctantly; see Hulsker 1977, p. 206.

<sup>3</sup> Jaarverslag over 1982 van de Nederlandse Rijksmusea, p. 90.

<sup>4</sup> Letter from A.H. Tellegen-Hoogendoorn, 21 February 1984. Her view was adopted by the museum. The painting was not included in the catalogue of the collection that appeared three years later (Amsterdam 1987); it was reinstated in Catalogue 1995, now, however, ascribed to an anonymous artist. Hulsker took up this new standpoint in the 1996 edition of the œuvre catalogue (p. 208).

<sup>5</sup> See the report of V.R. Mehra and J.A. Mosk, Centraal Laboratorium, Amsterdam, 3 June 1986, p. 2. The long stroke of the V was begun twice.

The signature can be found on only two other works, F 13 JH 179 and F 3 JH 186, both of which came from the same collection as the View of the IJ. See fn. 10.

<sup>6</sup> Letter from Bert Gerlagh, curator at the Gemeentearchief Amsterdam, 29 October 1998.

<sup>7</sup> See cat. 41, fn. 11.

<sup>8</sup> De la Faille 1970, p. 114, states that it may have been exhibited in Rotterdam in 1904 (no. 12). This is impossible, however, considering the title of that picture – Centraal Station. The work displayed has probably been lost; see cat. 41, fn. 7.

<sup>9</sup> On his collection, which contained numerous works by Van Gogh, see Margrit Hahnloser-Ingold, 'History of the collection at the villa Flora,' in exhib. cat. 'Luxe, calme et volupté.' Regards sur le Post-Impressionisme. Collectionneurs à Winterthur et Baden au début du xxe siècle, Luxembourg (Casino Luxembourg) 1995, pp. 71-83.

<sup>10</sup> See De la Faille 1970, p. 114, and the letter from A.H. Tellegen-Hoogendoorn, op. cit. (note 4), which contains information from the former owner. We do not know exactly which works Hahnloser bought, but these likely included F 13 JH 179 and F 3 JH 186 in addition to the picture described here.

Beneath the yellowed varnish we find a sunny, blue sky. In connection with Amsterdam, this alone excludes the possibility that the scene was painted by Van Gogh: we know he had only bad weather during his visit to the capital.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, this picture was probably executed in the spring or summer, as indicated by the bright green of the grass in the foreground.

The work's provenance is unclear.<sup>8</sup> The first documented owner was the Swiss ophthalmologist Arthur Hahnloser (1870-1936), a collector of modern art.<sup>9</sup> According to tradition, he had bought the picture, along with five others, before the First World War for Dfl. 1,200 from a Dutch miller.<sup>10</sup> In 1982 it was purchased through a gallery by the Van Gogh Museum from the heir.



Anonymous, *Souvenir of Amsterdam*, 1883. Amsterdam, Gemeentearchief.



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# Consignments

## PAINTINGS SENT OR GIVEN TO THEO VAN GOGH, 1882-85

The following is a list of the paintings that Van Gogh either dispatched or gave to Theo in the period 1882-85. For the sake of completeness it also contains the works that Vincent took to Antwerp at the end of November 1885, for they too entered Theo's collection. The number in each batch is only given after the date of dispatch if it can be calculated on the direct evidence of the letters. Works that cannot be proved conclusively to have been in Theo's collection (see the introductory essay 'Five parcels and three crates', notes 29, 30, 44 and 45), are marked with an asterisk (for an explanation see also notes 43 and 49).

It seems likely that Theo also gave paintings back (see the essay, and especially notes 6 and 9); these are marked with a double asterisk. Those sent from Drenthe that may have been returned to Vincent included two paintings that are now only known from sketches in the letters (see note 9). They have not been included.

Consignment 8 may never have been dispatched (see note 16).

It is not always possible to say precisely which works were in the batches. They are therefore divided into three categories: certain, probable and unclear – the latter listing those paintings that cannot be directly associated with a specific consignment.

## Remark

*The following paintings from Theo's collection could have been in consignments 5 or 6: F 36 JH 698 (cat. 21), F 61r JH 533 (cat. 9), F 69 JH 724 (cat. 15), F 70 JH 715, F 70a JH 716 (cat. 22), F 71 JH 719 (cat. 23), F 140 JH 745, F 154 JH 608\*, F 156 JH 569 (cat. 10), F 160a JH 563\*, F 161 JH 788 (cat. 20), F 164 JH 558 (cat. 11), F 175 JH 497 (cat. 24), F 178r JH 528\*, F 179r JH 786 (cat. 17), F 191 JH 762, F 269r JH 725 (cat. 16), F 365r JH 654\*. Some of these may have been taken by Theo personally on 31 March 1885, or by Vincent when he moved to Antwerp at the end of November 1885.*

| CONSIGNMENT  | LETTERS  | WORKS - <i>certain</i>  | <i>probable</i>   | <i>unclear</i>  |
|--|--|---|---|---|
| 1 Sent from The Hague,<br>c. 25 September 1882<br>Number: 1                                  | 270/234  | -   | F 8 JH 182**  | -   |
| 2 Sent from Hoogeveen,<br>24 September 1883<br>Number: 3                                     | 392/327, 434/358   | -   | -   | F 17 JH 395 ( <i>cat. 3</i> )   |
| 3 Sent from<br>Nieuw-Amsterdam,<br>mid-November 1883<br>Number: 6                            | 408/341, 434/358   | -   | F 19 JH 409 ( <i>cat. 4</i> ),<br>F 22 JH 421 ( <i>cat. 5</i> )   | F 17 JH 395 ( <i>cat. 3</i> )   |
| 4 Sent from Nuenen,<br>13 February 1884<br>Number: 3   | 431/356  | -   | -   | -   |
| 5 Taken from Nuenen by<br>Theo, 31 March 1884<br>Number: not mentioned                       | 488/395, 493/398,<br>492/397   | F 76 JH 542 ( <i>cat. 8</i> )   | F 80a JH 682 ( <i>cat. 14</i> ),<br>F 130 JH 692 ( <i>cat. 12</i> ),<br>F 160 JH 722 ( <i>cat. 13</i> ) | -   |
| 6 Sent from Nuenen,<br>5 and 6 May 1885<br>Number: 1 and 'ten'                               | 500/403, 501/404,<br>502/405, 503/406,<br>504/407, 505/408,<br>506/409 | F 77r JH 686 ( <i>cat. 25</i> ),<br>F 82 JH 764 ( <i>cat. 26</i> )  | F 85 JH 693*  | See remark below  |
| 7 Sent from Nuenen,<br>early June 1885<br>Number: 14   | 506/409, 509/410,<br>510/411, 514/414                                  | F 83 JH 777 ( <i>cat. 27</i> ),<br>F 84 JH 772 ( <i>cat. 28</i> ),<br>F 86 JH 785*  | F 141 JH 783*, F 163<br>JH 687  | F 388r JH 782 ( <i>cat. 18</i> )<br>and see remark below  |
| 8 Possibly taken by<br>Theo, 7 August 1885<br>Number: 2                                      | -  | -   | -   | -   |
| 9 Sent from Nuenen, mid-<br>October 1885<br>Number: not mentioned                            | 537/426, 538/427,<br>539/428   | F 51 JH 925 ( <i>cat. 35</i> ),<br>F 99 JH 930 ( <i>cat. 33</i> ),<br>F 100 JH 931 ( <i>cat. 30</i> ),<br>F 105 JH 926, F 107<br>JH 933 ( <i>cat. 32</i> ), F 111<br>JH 939 ( <i>cat. 39</i> ), F 113<br>JH 944, F 116 JH 934<br>( <i>cat. 31</i> ), F 211 JH 973<br>( <i>cat. 41</i> ) | -   | F 49 JH 534 ( <i>cat. 37</i> ),<br>F 53 JH 538 ( <i>cat. 36</i> ),<br>F 101 JH 927 ( <i>cat. 34</i> ),<br>F 106 JH 936*, F 109r<br>JH 942 ( <i>cat. 38</i> ), F 112<br>JH 938*, F 182 JH 948<br>( <i>cat. 40</i> ), F 388r JH 782<br>( <i>cat. 18</i> )                                     |
| 10 Taken to Antwerp by Vincent<br>c. 25 November 1885<br>Number: 3 and 'a few small<br>ones' | 540/429, 545/434,<br>548/437, 555/444,<br>556/445                      | F 45 JH 959, F 117<br>JH 946 ( <i>cat. 42</i> )   | -   | F 49 JH 534 ( <i>cat. 37</i> ),<br>F 53 JH 538 ( <i>cat. 36</i> ),<br>F 101 JH 927 ( <i>cat. 34</i> ),<br>F 103 JH 928 ( <i>cat. 43</i> ),<br>F 106 JH 936*, F 109r<br>JH 942 ( <i>cat. 38</i> ), F 112<br>JH 938*, F 182 JH 948<br>( <i>cat. 40</i> ), F 388r JH 782<br>( <i>cat. 18</i> ) |

Number of paintings with Theo: 53

10

15

28

# Exhibitions

1892 AMSTERDAM Firma Buffa en Zonen, February  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
De La Faille 1970, p. 614

1896 PARIS Galerie Vollard, November  
Title unknown (no cat. known)  
b 1437 V/1962, b 3055 V/1962

1903 ROTTERDAM Kunstuilen Oldenzeel, 4 January-5 February  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
Onze Kunst 1903, no. 3,  
pp. 114-16

1904 GRONINGEN Kunsthandel Scholtens, March  
Title unknown (no cat. known)  
Onze Kunst 1904, no. 7, p. 3  
ROTTERDAM Kunstuilen Oldenzeel, 10 November-15 December  
*Tentoonstelling van werken door Vincent van Gogh*  
De La Faille 1970, pp. 612, 617,  
Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant  
(27 November 1904)

1905 AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 15 July-1 September  
*Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh*  
b 2192 V/1982, b 5422 V/1966,  
b 6240-41 V/1996, 1908 Paris,  
1912 Dresden, De la Faille 1970,  
p. 614  
UTRECHT Vereeniging "Voor de Kunst", September  
*Tentoonstelling van schilderijen door Vincent van Gogh*  
b 5602 V/1962, b 7192 V/1962,  
1905 Amsterdam  
LEIDEN Leidsche Kunstvereeniging, 7-16 October  
*Tentoonstelling van schilderijen door Vincent van Gogh*

b 1952 V/1962, b 5433 V/1996,  
b 5686 V/1996, b 7202 V/1962,  
1905 Amsterdam

1906 ROTTERDAM Kunstuilen Oldenzeel, 26 January-28 February  
*Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh*  
b 5426 V/1996, b 7193 V/1962  
MIDDELBURG Sociëteit Sint Joris, 25 March-1 April  
*Tentoonstelling van werken van Vincent van Gogh (verzameling mevr. Cohen Gosschalk)*  
(no catalogue)  
b 5439 V/1996, b 5443 V/1996,  
b 5446 V/1996

1907 ROTTERDAM Vereeniging Voor de Kunst, April  
Title unknown  
De Kroniek (6 April 1907),  
pp. 109-10

1908 PARIS Galerie Bernheim-Jeune, 6 January-1 February  
*Cent tableaux de Vincent van Gogh*  
b 4046 V/1989, b 5755 V/1996,  
b 5760 V/1996, b 5763 V/1996,  
p 678-680 M/1986, p 682  
M/1986  
BERLIN I Cassirer, 5-22 March  
vii. Ausstellung  
b 4046 V/1989, 1905 Amsterdam  
MUNICH Moderne Kunsthalle, April  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
b 3918 V/1989, 1905  
Amsterdam  
DRESSEN Emil Richter, April-May  
*Vincent van Gogh/Paul Cézanne*  
b 2191 V/1982, b 3905 V/1989,  
b 3918 V/1989, 1905

Amsterdam  
FRANKFURT Frankfurter Kunstverein, 14-28 June  
*V. van Gogh Ausstellung*  
ZÜRICH Künstlerhaus, 10-26 July  
*Vincent van Gogh, Cuno Amiet, Hans Emmenegger, Giovanni Giacometti*  
THE HAGUE Kunstuilen C.M. van Gogh, dates unknown;  
AMSTERDAM Kunstuilen C.M. van Gogh, 3-24 September  
*Vincent van Gogh tentoonstelling* (The Hague no cat. known)  
b 5418 V/1996, 1908 Berlin II, Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant (9 September 1908)  
BERLIN II Cassirer, October Title unknown (no cat. known)  
b 4058 V/1989, 1905 Amsterdam  
BERLIN III Cassirer, 15 October-8 November  
11. Ausstellung

1910 BERLIN Cassirer, 25 October-20 November  
III. Ausstellung. *Vincent van Gogh 1853-1890*  
b 2184 V/1982, Feilchenfeldt archive

1911 FRANKFURT Galerie Hermes, January  
Title unknown (no cat. known)  
b 4076 V/1989, 1910 Berlin, Maitland 1963, p. 35  
AMSTERDAM Larensche Kunsthalle, 16 June-July  
*Tentoonstelling van schilderijen, aquarellen en teekeningen van Vincent van Gogh*  
b 5479 V/1996, 1905 Amsterdam

1911-12 HAMBURG Galerie Commeter, 10 November-March  
Title unknown (no cat. known)  
b 3817 V/1989, 1905 Amsterdam

1912 DRESDEN & BRESLAU Galerie Arnold, February  
*Ausstellung Vincent van Gogh 1853-1890*

1913 NEW YORK 69th Regiment Armory, 17 February-15 March  
*International exhibition of modern art*

Brown 1988, p. 272,  
Heijbroek/Wouthuysen 1993,  
p. 192

CHICAGO The Art Institute of Chicago, 24 March-16 April  
*International exhibition of modern art*

Brown 1988, p. 272,  
Heijbroek/Wouthuysen 1993,  
p. 192

BOSTON Copley Hall, 28 April-18 May  
*International exhibition of modern art*

Brown 1988, p. 272,  
Heijbroek/Wouthuysen 1993,  
p. 192

THE HAGUE Gebouw Lange Voorhout 1, July-1 September  
*Werken van Vincent van Gogh*  
BROMBERG Kunstgewerbeschule, September-November  
*Vincent van Gogh* (no cat. known)  
Heijbroek/Wouthuysen 1993,  
p. 192

1914 ANTWERP Feestzaal, 7 March-5 April  
*L'art contemporain. Salon 1914 / Kunst van Heden. Tentoonstelling 1914*

b 4081 V/1989, 1914 Berlin  
BERLIN Cassirer, 1 June-5 July  
*Vincent van Gogh 30. März 1853-29. July 1890. Zehnte Ausstellung*  
Feilchenfeldt archive

MONS Bon Vouloir, 20 June-12 July  
*XIXe Salon*  
COLOGNE Kölner Kunstverein, 3-August; HAMBURG Galerie Commeter, September  
Title unknown (no cat. known)

b 4081-82 V/1989, 1914 Berlin  
 1915 AMSTERDAM Gebouw van het Genootschap van kunstenaren Moderne Kunstkring, 26 September-30 November *Vincent van Gogh, werken van genooten. Schilderijen, tekeningen en beeldhouwwerken*

1920 NEW YORK Montross Gallery, 23 October-December *Vincent van Gogh exhibition* b 6240-41 V/1996, 1905 Amsterdam

1923 AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, September *Tentoonstelling van Nederlandsche Beeldende Kunsten*

1924 AMSTERDAM Gebouw voor Beeldende Kunst, March-April *Vincent van Gogh tentoonstelling* De La Faille 1970, pp. 615-16 BASEL Kunsthalle Basel, 27 March-4 May *Vincent van Gogh* b 6060 V/1996 ZÜRICH Kunsthaus Zürich, 3 July-10 August *Vincent van Gogh* b 6070 V/1996, b 6073 V/1996 UTRECHT Vereeniging Voor de Kunst, 5 October-2 November *Tentoonstelling van oude en moderne schilderijen uit Utrechtsche verzamelingen* STUTTGART Württembergischer Kunstverein, 12 October-30 November *Ausstellung Vincent van Gogh 1853-1890* b 6139 V/1996, b 6159 V/1996

1925 PARIS Galerie Marcel Bernheim, 5-24 January *Exposition rétrospective d'œuvres de Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890)* b 6157 V/1996 THE HAGUE Pulchri Studio, March-April *Vincent van Gogh* (no catalogue) b 5533 V/1996, b 5537-38 V/1996

1926 THE HAGUE Gemeente-museum voor moderne kunst, 27 February-31 March *Nederlandsche stillevens uit vijf eeuwen* AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 15 May-15 June *Vincent van Gogh tentoonstelling ter gelegenheid van het internationale jeugdfeest der S.J.I.* Munich Münchner Glaspalast, 1 June-early October 1. *Allgemeine Kunst-Ausstellung* De La Faille 1970, p. 616 DRESDEN Staatliche Gemäldegalerie, 12 June-30 September *Internationale Kunstausstellung* b 6183 V/1996, b 6186 V/1996 LONDON The Leicester Galleries, November-December *Vincent van Gogh exhibition*

1927-28 ROTTERDAM Museum Boijmans, 23 December-16 January *Kersttentoonstelling in het Museum Boijmans*

1928 BERLIN Cassirer, 15 January-? *Vincent van Gogh. Gemälde* FRANKFURT AM MAIN Galerie Goldschmidt, 15 March-15 April *Vincent van Gogh. Gemälde* 1928 Berlin VIENNA Neue Galerie, May-June *Vincent van Gogh. Gemälde* 1928 Frankfurt am Main

1928-29 HANOVER Kestner-Gesellschaft, 3 October-11 November; MUNICH Graphisches Kabinett, 22 November-late December; LEIPZIG Museum der bildenden Künste, 24 February-31 March *Vincent van Gogh. Fünfunddreißig unbekannte Gemälde aus Privatbesitz* (Hanover no catalogue, Leipzig no cat. known) b 6202 V/1996, b 6203 V/1996, b 6206 V/1996

1929 UTRECHT Vereeniging Voor de Kunst, 1 May-5 June *Tentoonstelling van schilderijen door Vincent van Gogh* b 5644 V/1996

1930 AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 6 September-2 November *Vincent van Gogh en zijn tijdgenoten* HILVERSUM Makermacht, 29-30 November Title unknown (no cat. known) b 5673 V/1996

1931 AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 7 February-7 March *Vincent van Gogh. Werken uit de verzameling van Ir. V.W. van Gogh, in bruikleen afgestaan aan de Gemeente Amsterdam*

1932 AMSTERDAM Kunsthandel Huinck & Scherjon, 14 May-18 June *Schilderijen door Vincent van Gogh, J.B. Jongkind, Floris Verster* COLOGNE Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, 10 June -? 21 *Gemälde von Vincent van Gogh* (no cat. known) b 5464 V/1996 MANCHESTER Manchester City Art Gallery, 13 October-27 November *Vincent van Gogh. Loan collection of paintings & drawings*

1935 DEN BOSCH Centraal Noord-Brabantsch Museum, 6-31 July *Tentoonstelling Noord-Brabant* b 5682 V/1996

1935-36 NEW YORK The Museum of Modern Art, 5 November-5 January; PHILADELPHIA Philadelphia Museum of Art, 11 January-10 February; BOSTON Museum of Fine Arts, 19 February-15 March; CLEVELAND Cleveland Museum of Art, 25 March-19 April; San Francisco California Palace of the Legion of Honor, 28 April-24 May; Kansas City William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art and Atkins Museum, 9 June-10 July; MINNEAPOLIS Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 20 July-17 August; CHICAGO The Art Institute of Chicago, 26 August-23 September; DETROIT Detroit Institute of Arts, 6-28 October *Vincent van Gogh* Detroit Free Press (4 October 1936)

1937 PARIS Les nouveaux musées, Quai de Tokyo, June-October *La vie et l'œuvre de Van Gogh* OSLO Kunstsnernes Hus, 3-24 December *Vincent van Gogh. Malerier, tegninger, akvareller*

1938 COPENHAGEN Charlottenborg, January *Vincent van Gogh. Malerier, tegninger, akvareller* PARIS Galerie des Beaux-Arts, March-April *La peinture française du xixe siècle en Suisse, organisé par La Gazette des Beaux-Arts* BATAVIA Museum van den Bataviaschen Kunstkring, 17 May-? *Vierde collectie Regnault* 1940 New York EINDHOVEN Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, 11 June-1 July *Schilders van de Haagsche School* AMSTERDAM Van Wisselingh, 10 August-10 September *Nederlandsche schilderkunst. Meesterwerken uit de 19-de eeuw*

1939 SURABAYA Kunstkringhuis Soerabayische Kunstkring, 13-19 January *Expositie van schilderijen van Vincent van Gogh* 1940 New York, Ons Kring-

nieuws (5 January 1939), p. 2

BANDUNG Jaarbeursgebouw, 24-31 January  
*Vierde collectie Regnault*

1940 New York, Algemeen Indisch Dagblad (18 January 1939)

SAN FRANCISCO Treasure Island, Palace of Fine and Decorative Arts, 18 February-29 October  
*Masterworks of five centuries*

1940 New York

1940 CLEVELAND The Cleveland Museum of Art, 7 February-7 March  
*Masterpieces of art from the New York and San Francisco World's Fairs*

1940 New York

LUCERNE Kunstmuseum, 3 March-December  
*Die Hauptwerke der Sammlung Hahnloser Winterthur*

CAMBRIDGE Fogg Art Museum, 18 March-10 April; NEW HAVEN Gallery of Fine Arts of Yale University, 14 April-28 May  
Title unknown (no catalogue)

1940 New York

NEW YORK Holland House, 6 June-19 July  
*Exhibition of paintings by Vincent van Gogh*

ROTTERDAM Museum Boijmans, July-?  
Title unknown (no catalogue)  
De Maasbode (4 August 1940)

1941 BOSTON Jordan Marsh Company Galleries, 3-16 March  
Title unknown (no cat. known)

1940 New York, Boston Herald (3 March 1941)

1942 BALTIMORE The Baltimore Museum of Art, 18 September-18 October;  
WORCESTER Worcester Art Museum, 28 October-28 November  
*Paintings by Van Gogh*

PROVIDENCE Rhode Island School of Design, 5-30 December  
Title unknown (no cat. known)

1940 New York

1943 ALBANY Albany Institute of History & Art, 6-26 January; PITTSBURGH Carnegie Institute, 5 February-1 March; TOLEDO Toledo Museum of Art, 7-28 March  
*An exhibition of modern Dutch art. 14 paintings by Vincent van Gogh and work by contemporary Dutch artists*

NORTHAMPTON Smith College Museum of Art, 5-22 April;

PHILADELPHIA The Philadelphia Art Alliance, 30 April-23 May;

MONTGOMERY Montgomery Museum of Fine Arts, 30 May-30 June  
*Paintings by Vincent van Gogh/Oils by Van Gogh*

(Northampton and Montgomery no cat. known)

b 6321 V/1996, 1940 New York

SAINT LOUIS City Art Museum of Saint Louis, 17 July-15 August  
*An exhibition of modern Dutch art. 14 paintings by Vincent van Gogh and work by contemporary Dutch artists*

SPRINGFIELD The George Walter Vincent Smith Art Gallery, September  
*Paintings by Vincent van Gogh and contemporary Dutch artists*

(no cat. known)

b 6321 V/1996, 1940 New York

NEW YORK Wildenstein, 6 October-7 November  
*The art and life of Vincent van Gogh. Loan exhibition in aid of American and Dutch war relief*

1943-44 INDIANAPOLIS John Herron Art Institute, 8 November-12 December;

CINCINNATI Cincinnati Art Museum, 5-30 January; OTTAWA National Gallery, 11-27 February  
*An exhibition of modern Dutch*

*art. 14 paintings by Vincent van Gogh and work by contemporary Dutch artists*

1944 MONTREAL Art Association of Montreal, 9 March-9 April  
*Loan exhibition of great paintings. Five centuries of Dutch Art/Exposition de tableaux célèbres. Cinq siècles d'art Hollandais*

FORT WAYNE Fort Wayne Art School & Museum, 10-29 May  
*An exhibition of modern Dutch art. 14 paintings by Vincent van Gogh and work by contemporary Dutch artists*

NEW YORK Brooklyn Museum, 28 June-24 September  
*Paintings by Vincent van Gogh*

RICHMOND Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, 1-22 October  
*Modern Dutch art. Art of our allies series (no catalogue)*

1940 New York

CHARLESTON Gibbes Art Gallery, 29 October-26 November  
*Paintings by Vincent van Gogh*

ATLANTA High Museum of Art, 3-27 December  
*Paintings by Van Gogh (no cat. known)*

b 6321 V/1996, 1940 New York

1945 NEW ORLEANS Isaac Delgado Museum, 7-28 January;  
LOUISVILLE J.B. Speed Memorial Museum, 4-25 February;  
SYRACUSE The Syracuse Museum of Fine Arts, 4-25 March  
*Paintings by Vincent van Gogh*

(New Orleans no cat. known, Syracuse no catalogue)

b 6321 V/1996, 1940 New York

TORONTO Art Gallery of Toronto, 6-29 April; QUEBEC Musée du Quebec, 11 May-3 June  
*Paintings by Vincent van Gogh*

(Toronto no cat. known)

b 6321 V/1996

NEW YORK The Museum of Modern Art, 3-26 August  
*Fourteen paintings by Vincent van Gogh (no catalogue)*

b 6320-21 V/1996

AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 14 September-1 December  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1946 MAASTRICHT Bonnefanten, 12-28 January;  
HEERLEN Raadhuis, 8-24 February  
*Vincent van Gogh*

STOCKHOLM Nationalmuseum, 8 March-28 April; GOTHEBORG Göteborgs Konstmuseum, 3-26 May; MALMÖ Malmö Museum, 29 May-16 June  
*Vincent van Gogh. Utställning anordnad till förmån för svenska holländshjälpen*

COPENHAGEN Charlottenborg, 22 June-14 July  
*Vincent van Gogh. Udstilling af malerier og tegninger*

AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 14 August-30 September  
*Vincent van Gogh (no catalogue)*

De Waarheid (25 August 1946)

1946-47 LIÈGE Musée des Beaux-Arts, 12 October-3 November; BRUSSELS Palais des Beaux-Arts, 9 November-19 December; MONS Musée des Beaux-Arts, 27 December-January  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1947 PARIS Musée de l'Orangerie, 24 January-15 March  
*Vincent van Gogh*

GENEVA Musée Rath, 22 March-20 April  
*172 œuvres de Vincent van Gogh (1852-1890)*

GRONINGEN Museum van Oudheden, 18 October-16 November  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1947-48 LONDON The Tate Gallery, 10 December-14

January; BIRMINGHAM City Art Gallery, 24 January-14 February; GLASGOW City Art Gallery, 21 February-14 March  
*Vincent van Gogh* 1853-1890 b 6773 V/1996

1948 BERGEN Kunstforening, 23 March-18 April; OSLO Kunstnernes Hus, 24 April-15 May  
*Vincent van Gogh*

AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 25 June-20 September  
*Vincent van Gogh en zijn Nederlandse tijdgenoten*  
 Contact 1948 (September), p. 203

1948-49 THE HAGUE Haags Gemeentemuseum, 12 October-10 January  
*Vincent van Gogh. Collectie ir. V.W. van Gogh*

1949 MIDDDELBURG Kunstmuseum, 9 April-1 May  
*Van Gogh-tentoonstelling*  
 BOLSWARD Stadhuis, 2-28 May  
*19e eeuwse kunstschatten uit het Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam* (no cat. known)

BSM

1949-50 NEW YORK The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 21 October-15 January; CHICAGO The Art Institute of Chicago, 1 February-16 April  
*Vincent van Gogh paintings and drawings. A special loan exhibition*

1950 HILVERSUM Raadhuis, 7 October-5 November  
*Tentoonstelling Vincent van Gogh*

1951 LYONS Musée de Lyon, 5 February-27 March; GRENOBLE Musée de Grenoble, 30 March-2 May  
*Vincent van Gogh*

ARLES Musée Réattu, 5-27 May  
*Vincent van Gogh en Provence*

SAINT-RÉMY Hotel de Sade, 5-27 May  
*Vincent van Gogh en Provence*

1951-52 NIJMEGEN Waaggebouw, 3-27 November; ALKMAAR Stedelijk Museum, 1 December-1 January  
*Tentoonstelling schilderijen van Vincent van Gogh*  
 BSM

1952 ENSCHEDE Rijksmuseum Twenthe, 20 February-16 March  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 BSM

MILAN Palazzo Reale, 23 February-13 May  
*Van Gogh. Dipinti e disegni*  
 EINDHOVEN Stedelijk Van Abbe Museum, 22 March-4 May  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1953 THE HAGUE Haags Gemeentemuseum, 30 March-17 May  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 ZUNDERT Parochiehuis, 30 March-20 April  
*Vincent van Gogh in Zundert*  
 HOENS BROEK Kasteel Hoensbroek, 23 May-27 July  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 BSM

OTTERLO Kröller-Müller Museum, 24 May-19 July;  
 AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 23 July-20 September  
*Eeuwfeest Vincent van Gogh*  
 IJMUIDEN Hoogovens, October  
*Vincent van Gogh. Exposition in the canteens of the Royal Netherlands Blast Furnaces and Steelworks*  
 BSM

ASSEN Provinciehuis, 6-29 November  
*Vincent van Gogh in Assen*  
 BSM

1953-54 SAINT LOUIS City Art Museum of Saint Louis, 17 October-13 December;

Philadelphia Philadelphia Museum of Art, 2 January-28 February; TOLEDO The Toledo Museum of Art, 7 March-30 April  
*Vincent van Gogh* 1853-1890  
 BERGEN OP ZOOM Stadhuis, 23 December-10 January  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 BSM

1954 DORDRECHT Dordrechts Museum, 17 July-31 August  
*Nederlandse stillevens uit vier eeuwen*  
 BSM

ZÜRICH Kunsthaus Zürich, 9 October-21 November  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1954-55 BERN Kunstmuseum Bern, 27 November-30 January  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 WILLEMSTAD Curaçao Museum, 19 December-15 January  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1955 PALM BEACH Society of the Four Arts, 21 January-13 February; MIAMI Lowe Gallery of the University of Miami, 24 February-20 March;  
 NEW ORLEANS Isaac Delgado Museum, 27 March-20 April  
*Vincent van Gogh* 1853-1890  
 NEW YORK Wildenstein, 24 March-30 April  
*Vincent van Gogh loan exhibition*  
 ANTWERP I Feestzaal, 7 May-19 June  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 ANTWERP II Zaal C.A.W., 15 May-9 June  
*Vincent van Gogh en zijn Hollandse tijdgenoten*  
 AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 24 June-September  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1955-56 LIVERPOOL The Walker Art Gallery, 29 October-10 December; MANCHESTER  
*Vincent van Gogh* (1853-1890)

Manchester City Art Gallery, 17 December-4 February;  
 NEWCASTLE-UPON-TYNE Laing Art Gallery, 11 February-24 March  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings & drawings, mainly from the collection of Ir. V.W. van Gogh*

1956 AMSTERDAM Van Wisse-lingh, 20 February-17 March  
*Vincent van Gogh* 1853-1890.  
*Quelques œuvres de l'époque 1881-1886 provenant de collections particulières néerlandaises*  
 LEEUWARDEN Fries Museum, 14 April-13 May  
*Vincent van Gogh uit de collectie Ir. V.W. van Gogh, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam*  
 RECKLINGHAUSEN Kunsthalle, 17 June-30 July  
*Beginn und Reife*  
 BREDA Cultureel Centrum, 30 June-29 July  
*Confrontatie noord/zuid*  
 MUNICH Haus der Kunst, 19 October-16 December  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1957 BREDA De Beyerd, 2-24 February  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 MARSEILLES Musée Cantini, 12 March-28 April  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
 MONTREAL Watson Art Galleries, ?-14 April  
*French paintings of the xixth and xxth centuries*  
 RECKLINGHAUSEN Kunsthalle, 17 June-31 July  
*Verkannte Kunst*  
 NUENEN Pastorie, 14-21 August  
 Title unknown (no catalogue)  
 BSM

IJZENDIJK Gemeentehuis, 3-30 September  
*De boer in de Nederlandse schilderkunst* (no catalogue)  
 BSM

ESSEN Villa Hügel, 16 October-15 December  
*Vincent van Gogh* (1853-1890)

*Leben und Schaffen. Dokumentation, Gemälde, Zeichnungen*  
1957-58 STOCKHOLM Nationalmuseum, 5 October-22 November; LULEÅ Shoppingcenter, 4-19 December; KIRUNA Norrmalmsskolan, 29 December-13 January; UMEÅ Länmuseet, 18 January-2 February; ÖSTERSUND Konstmuseet, 8-23 February; SANDVIKEN Konsthallen, 27 February-11 March; GOTHEBORG Göteborgs Konsthallen, 15-30 March  
*Vincent van Gogh. Akvareller, teckningar, oljestudier, brev* (cat. Stockholm, otherwise no cat. known)  
b 6783 V/1996  
LEIDEN Stedelijk Museum De Lakenhal, 9 November-16 December; SCHIEDAM Stedelijk Museum, 21 December-27 January  
*Vincent van Gogh*  
BSM

1958 DEVENTER Muntentoren, 31 January-20 February  
*Schilderijen van Vincent van Gogh*  
BSM  
PARIS Musée National d'Art Moderne, 6 March-20 April  
*L'Art Hollandais depuis Van Gogh*  
MONS Musée des Beaux-Arts, 22 March-5 May  
*Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). Son art et ses amis*

1958-59 SAN FRANCISCO The M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, 6 October-30 November; LOS ANGELES Los Angeles County Museum, 10 December-18 January; PORTLAND The Portland Art Museum, 28 January-1 March; SEATTLE Seattle Art Museum, 7 March-19 April  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings and drawings*

1959 BORDEAUX Galerie des Beaux-Arts, 20 May-31 July  
*La découverte de la lumière des primitifs aux impressionnistes*

1959-60 UTRECHT Centraal Museum, 18 December-1 February  
*Vincent van Gogh schilderijen en tekeningen, verzameling Ir. V.W. van Gogh*

1960 PARIS Musée Jacquemart-André, February-May  
*Vincent van Gogh 1853-1890*  
BRUSSELS Palais des Beaux-Arts, 21 May-30 June  
*Le drame social dans l'art. De Goya à Picasso*  
AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 30 June-19 September  
*3 ages, leeftijden, alter*  
CUESMES Ecoles Communales, 1-20 October  
*Exposition Vincent van Gogh. Oeuvres originales et la collection complète des reproductions d'œuvres de Vincent*  
TORONTO Laing Galleries, ?-19 November  
*French paintings of the xixth and xxth centuries*

1960-61 MONTREAL The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, 6 October-6 November; OTTAWA The National Gallery of Canada, 17 November-18 December;  
WINNIPEG The Winnipeg Art Gallery, 29 December-31 January; TORONTO The Art Gallery of Toronto, 10 February-12 March  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings-drawings/Tableaux-dessins*  
THE HAGUE Haags Gemeentemuseum, November-May?  
*Vincent van Gogh en zijn tijd*  
BSM

1961 WOLFSBURG Stadthalle, 8 April-31 May  
*Französische Malerei von Delacroix*

bis Picasso  
HUMLEBAEK Louisiana, 28 October-3 December  
*Stedelijk Museum besöker Louisiana*  
BSM

ANNEN Gemeentehuis, 18-29 November 150 jaar schilderen in Drente. Expositie van werken van bekende schilders die tijdens hun leven in Drente gewerkt hebben

1961-62 MELBOURNE National Gallery of Victoria, 16 October-?; LAUNCESTON Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery, 21 November-4 December;  
SYDNEY Art Gallery of New South Wales, 14 December-4 January; ADELAIDE National Gallery of South Australia, 23 January-6 February  
*Trends in Dutch painting*  
BALTIMORE The Baltimore Museum of Art, 18 October-26 November; CLEVELAND The Cleveland Museum of Art, 5 December-14 January;  
BUFFALO Albright Art Gallery, 30 January-11 March; BOSTON Museum of Fine Arts, 22 March-29 April  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings, watercolors and drawings*  
STOCKHOLM Moderna Museet, 26 December-28 January  
*Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam besöker Moderna Museet, Stockholm*  
BSM

1962 RECKLINGHAUSEN Kunsthalle Recklinghausen, 19 May-15 July  
*Idee und Vollendung*  
WARSZAWA Muzeum Narodowe, 8-18 October  
*Vincent van Gogh. Obrazy i rysunki. Wystawa dzieł ze zbiorów muzeów holenderskich*  
IVGM

1962-63 PITTSBURGH Carnegie Institute, 18 October-4 November; DETROIT Detroit  
*Vincent van Gogh. Schilderijen, aquarellen, tekeningen*

Institute of Arts, 11 December-29 January; KANSAS CITY William Rockhill Nelson Gallery of Art, Mary Atkins Museum of Fine Arts, 7 February-26 March  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings, watercolors and drawings*  
TEL AVIV Tel Aviv Museum, 30 December-14 February;  
HAIFA Museum of Modern Art, 20 February-20 March  
*Vincent van Gogh*

1963 SHEFFIELD Graves Art Gallery, 21 April-19 May  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings and drawings*  
AMSTERDAM Stedelijk Museum, 6 July-29 September  
*150 jaar Nederlandse Kunst. Schilderijen, beelden, tekeningen, grafiek 1813-1963*  
HUMLEBAEK Louisiana, 24 October-15 December  
*Vincent van Gogh. Malerier og tegninger*  
ANTWERP Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten, 9-31 December  
*Uitstraling van de Koninklijke Academie voor Schone Kunsten te Antwerp 1863-1914*

1964 WASHINGTON The Washington Gallery of Modern Art, 2 February-19 March; NEW YORK The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2 April-28 June  
*Vincent van Gogh. Paintings, watercolors and drawings*  
BSM

1965 CHARLEROI Palais des Beaux-Arts, 9 January-9 February; GHENT Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 19 February-28 March  
*Vincent van Gogh. Schilderijen, aquarellen, tekeningen*  
NUENEN Gemeentehuis, 8-31 May  
*Vincent van Gogh. Schilderijen, aquarellen, tekeningen*

1965-66 STOCKHOLM Moderna Museet, 23 October-19 December; GOTHEBORG Göteborgs Konstmuseum, 30 December-20 February *Vincent van Gogh. Målningar, akvareller, teckningar* (Gothenburg no cat. known) BSM

1967 WOLFSBURG Stadthalle Wolfsburg, 18 February-2 April *Vincent van Gogh. Gemälde, Aquarelle, Zeichnungen* HOOGEVEEN Cultureel Centrum De Tamboer, 21-30 April *Kunstenaarshanden in Drente. Expositie van werken van bekende schilders die tijdens hun leven in Drenthe werkten en van werken van hedendaagse Drentse kunstenaars* IVGM

TILBURG Nederlands Textielmuseum, 21 April-1 August *Het textielambacht in de schilderkunst van de 16e tot de 20e eeuw*

1968 BALTIMORE The Baltimore Museum of Art, 22 October-8 December *From El Greco to Pollock. Early and late works by European and American artists*

1968-69 LONDON Hayward Gallery, 23 October-12 January *Vincent van Gogh. Paintings and drawings of the Vincent van Gogh Foundation Amsterdam*

1969-70 LOS ANGELES The Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 14 October-1 December; SAINT LOUIS City Art Museum of Saint Louis, 20 December-1 February; PHILADELPHIA Philadelphia Museum of Art, 28 February-5 April [paintings only]; COLUMBUS The Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts, 5 March-5 April [drawings only] *Vincent van Gogh. Paintings and drawings*

1970-71 BALTIMORE The Baltimore Museum of Art, 11 October-29 November; SAN FRANCISCO The M.H. de Young Memorial Museum, 11 December-31 January; NEW YORK The Brooklyn Museum, 14 February-4 April *Vincent van Gogh. Paintings and drawings*

1971-72 PARIS Orangerie des Tuileries, 21 December-10 April *Vincent van Gogh. Collection du Musée National Vincent van Gogh à Amsterdam*

1972 BORDEAUX Musée des Beaux-Arts, 21 April-20 June *Vincent van Gogh. Collection du Musée National Vincent van Gogh à Amsterdam*

1972-73 STRASBOURG Musée d'Art Moderne, 22 October-15 January; BERN Kunstmuseum Bern, 25 January-15 April *Vincent van Gogh. Collection du Musée National Vincent van Gogh à Amsterdam*

1974-75 MILAN Palazzo Reale, 16 November-15 January *La ricerca dell'identità*

1975 EINDHOVEN Philips Ontspanningscentrum, 11 January-4 February *Lichteffecten in de schilderkunst* (no cat. known) BVGM

ZEIST Het Zeister Slot, 12 July-7 September *17 schilders in hun Haagsche tijd 1870-1910* IVGM

1976-77 TOKYO The National Museum of Western Art, 30 October-19 December; KYOTO The National Museum of Modern Art, 6 January-20 February; NAGOYA The Aichi Prefectural Art Gallery, 24 February-14 March *Vincent van Gogh exhibition*

1978 BORDEAUX Galerie des Beaux-Arts, 5 May-1 September *Nature morte de Brueghel à Soutine*

1979 SEOUL Seoul Sejong Cultural Center Exhibition Hall, 8-22 October *Dutch landscape painting of the nineteenth century*

1980 Utrecht Centraal Museum, 7 June-20 July *Een schilderij centraal. Arbeiders op steensfabriek Ruimzicht van Anthon G.A. van Rappard* MONS Musée des Beaux-Arts, 3 October-30 November *Van Gogh et la Belgique*

1980-81 AMSTERDAM Van Gogh Museum, 13 December-22 March *Vincent van Gogh in zijn Hollandse jaren. Kijk op stad en land door Van Gogh en zijn tijdgenoten 1870-1890*

1983 PARIS Grand Palais, 15 January-28 March; LONDON Royal Academy of Arts, 16 April-10 July; THE HAGUE Haags Gemeentemuseum, 5 August-31 October *The Hague School. Dutch masters of the 19th century*

1983-84 HAMBURG Hamburger Kunsthalle, 11 November-8 January *Luther und die Folgen für die Kunst*

1984 NUENEN Gemeentehuis, 6-20 October *Een brabantse Van Gogh ervaring 1985-86* TOKYO The National Museum of Western Art, 12 October-8 December; NAGOYA The Aichi Nagoya City Museum, 21 December-2 February *Vincent van Gogh exhibition*

1986 OSAKA The National Museum of Art, 21 February-31 March *Vincent van Gogh from Dutch collections. Religion, humanity, nature*

VANCOUVER Vancouver Art Gallery, 6 April-29 June *The Dutch world of painting*

1987-88 DEN BOSCH Noordbrabants Museum, 2 November-10 January *Van Gogh in Brabant. Schilderijen en tekeningen uit Etten en Nuenen*

1988 ROME Galleria Nazionale d'Arte Moderna, 28 January-4 April *Vincent van Gogh*

1988-89 AMSTERDAM Van Gogh Museum, 9 December-26 February *Van Gogh & Millet*

1989 VERONA Palazzo Forti, 7 July-10 October *Da Van Gogh a Schiele. L'Europa espressionista 1880-1918*

1990 AMSTERDAM Van Gogh Museum, 30 March-29 July *Vincent van Gogh. Schilderijen*

1990-91 ESSEN Museum Folkwang, 11 August-4 November; AMSTERDAM Van Gogh Museum, 16 November-18 February *Vincent van Gogh und die Moderne 1890-1914 / Vincent van Gogh en de moderne kunst 1890-1914*

GLASGOW The Burrell Collection, 10 November-10 February  
*The age of Van Gogh. Dutch painting 1880-1895*

1991 AMSTERDAM Van Gogh Museum, 1 March-26 May  
*De schilders van Tachtig. Nederlandse schilderkunst 1880-1895*

1992 LONDON Barbican Art Gallery, 27 February-4 May  
*Van Gogh in England. Portrait of the artist as a young man*

1993 AMSTERDAM Van Gogh Museum, 11 June-29 August  
*De aardappeleters van Vincent van Gogh*  
TOKYO Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, 15 September-14 November  
*Vincent van Gogh and his time. Van Gogh & Millet from the Vincent van Gogh Museum and the H.W. Mesdag Museum*

1993-94 MELBOURNE National Gallery of Victoria, 19 November-16 January; BRISBANE Queensland Art Gallery, 22 January-13 March  
*Van Gogh. His sources, genius and influence*

1995 TOKYO Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, 14 September-13 November  
*Vincent van Gogh and his time. Landscapes from the Van Gogh Museum and the H.W. Mesdag Museum*

1996 VIENNA Bank Austria Kunstforum, 28 February-27 May  
*Van Gogh und die Haager Schule*  
TOKYO Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, 12 September-11 November  
*Vincent van Gogh and his time. Still lifes from the Van Gogh Museum and the H.W. Mesdag Museum*

DEN BOSCH Noordbrabants Museum, 15 September-24 November  
*De muze als motor*

1997 ASSEN Drents Museum, 1 February-4 May  
*De Haagse School in Drenthe*  
TOKYO Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, 12 September-11 November  
*Vincent van Gogh and his time. Four seasons from the Van Gogh Museum and the H.W. Mesdag Museum*

1998-99 PARIS Musée d'Orsay, 14 September-10 January  
*Millet - Van Gogh*  
AMSTERDAM Rijksmuseum, 19 September-2 May  
*Van Gogh te gast in het Rijksmuseum. Meesterwerken van het Van Gogh Museum (no catalogue)*  
BVGM

ENSCHEDÉ Rijksmuseum Twenthe, 19 September-11 April  
*De grote expressie. Schilderijen van Van Gogh, Bernard, Israels, Puvis de Chavannes, Van Rappard, Sluijters en Von Stuck uit het Van Gogh Museum (no catalogue)*  
BVGM

WASHINGTON National Gallery of Art, 4 October-3 January;  
LOS ANGELES Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 17 January-16 May  
*Van Gogh's Van Goghs. Masterpieces from the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam*

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*Tentoonstelling van schilderijen en tekeningen door Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam (Stedelijk Museum) 1905

AMSTERDAM 1980-81 Griselda Pollock, exhib. cat. *Vincent van Gogh in zijn Hollandse jaren. Kijk op stad en land door Van Gogh en zijn tijdgenoten 1870-1890*, Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 1980-81

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AMSTERDAM 1991 II Richard Bionda and Carel Blotkamp (eds.), exhib. cat. *De schilders van Tachtig. Nederlandse schilderkunst 1880-1895*, Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) 1991

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ARNOLD 1997 Matthias Arnold, *Van Gogh und seine Vorbilder*, Munich & New York 1997

ASSEN 1997 Saskia de Bodt et al., exhib. cat. *De Haagse School in Drenthe*, Assen (Drents Museum) 1997

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*oogst van schrale grond. Een overzicht van de Zuid-Nederlandse materiële volkscultuur, ca. 1700-1900*, Den Bosch (Noordbrabants Museum) 1991-92

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# Colophon

## EDITORS

Sjraar van Heugten  
Leo Jansen  
Hans Luijten  
Jan Robert

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## TRANSLATORS AND

### ENGLISH EDITORS

Rachel Esner  
Michael Hoyle

## FRONT COVER

Detail of cat. 12, *Head of a woman*

## DOCUMENTATION

Monique Hageman  
Marije Vellekoop

## CO-ORDINATION

Benno Tempel

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**VAN GOGH**  
MUSEUM

The Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam is the custodian of more than 200 paintings and some 500 drawings by Vincent van Gogh. It is the largest and most representative collection of his work in the world. The museum's holdings, which came from the Van Gogh family, are being made accessible through a series of detailed collection catalogues. The paintings will be discussed in three volumes, the drawings in five.

*Vincent van Gogh, paintings. Dutch period, 1881-1885* examines the 44 Dutch paintings in the Van Gogh Museum. The collection contains acknowledged masterpieces like *The potato eaters*, *The cottage* and *Still-life with Bible*. There are also many studies of heads, still lifes and people at work in which Van Gogh experimented with the effects of light and shade, colour and the use of the brush. He first began painting in 1881, and developed remarkably rapidly from an untutored beginner to a true and original master. Although usually dark, his Dutch paintings do contain a surprising amount of colour. During his time in the Brabant village of Nuenen (1883-85), he set out to show that 'one of the most beautiful things that this century's painters have done is to paint DARKNESS that is nevertheless COLOUR'.

